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# 'Our place': class, the theatre audience and the Royal Court Liverpool

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# Abstract

This thesis investigates theatregoing and class, using as a locus the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool. The Royal Court is unusually successful in attracting and retaining first time theatregoers and others from some of the most deprived postcodes in the UK. The study's original contribution to knowledge is threefold: its focus on the relationship between theatre and audience that encompasses the whole theatregoing event; its focus on theatre audiences and social class; and its use of Bourdieu's conceptual triad not only as an underpinning theory and a framework, but also as a method. The findings have important implications for cultural policy, which has been over reliant on ticket pricing as a mechanism which has failed to widen cultural attendance.

The thesis uses a single case to examine the phenomenon of theatregoing. The primary method of investigation is a series of field visits of a theatre season and subsequent thick description of observations. This is supported by ethnographic methods in order to understand phenomena from the perspective of audience members; these are focus groups, interviews, and an analysis of user generated content (TripAdvisor).

The thesis finds that the history of the Royal Court Theatre has not only shaped its position in the field, but is key to its perception by audiences today, the building having a particular place in the imaginary of a working class culture. Inside the auditorium, innovative seating arrangements contribute to a playful social space that can be 'owned' by audiences. The Theatre's repertoire is distinctive, in that it employs tropes, such as comedy and participation, that are bound up with the concept of 'Scouse', itself a classed construct. These elements combine to form a physical and social space that is congruent to a working class habitus.

The implications of the findings are in two fields, sociology and cultural policy. From a sociological perspective, the thesis concludes that Bourdieu's conceptual triad is not only useful as a concept but also as a method by which to understand theatregoing and other phenomena in the twenty-first century. The application of Bourdieu's conceptual triad to the empirical phenomenon of twenty-first century British theatregoing results in a more nuanced understanding of a working class aesthetic and working class values. For cultural policy, the thesis finds that using pricing as a mechanism to widen cultural attendance is to miss the point of the real issues facing working class people in the theatre which are around symbolic violence. If we really wish to widen theatre attendance, we need to offer working class people a theatre model that speaks to their values.

# Chapter 1 Prologue: an introduction to the thesis

This thesis examines theatregoing at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, a theatre that is peculiarly successful in attracting and retaining working class people to its audiences. It explores what it is about the Royal Court Theatre that makes working class people feel at home, and asks what this tells us about Pierre Bourdieu's claims about the relationship between class and taste. The thesis has implications for theatre making and marketing strategies as well as for wider cultural policy. Theoretically, it reflects on the relevance and utility of Bourdieu's 'conceptual triad' for understanding and framing contemporary British theatregoing.

This chapter explains the rationale for the thesis and its investigation of the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool and its audience. It includes a short discussion of social class and its relevance in twenty-first century sociology, and the relationship between class and culture posited by Bourdieu. The chapter goes on to discuss the existing research on theatre

audiences, both generally and in relation to social class. It concludes by briefly introducing the ensuing chapters.

The initial impetus for this thesis was a visit to the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool in 2009 to see a production of Waugh and Wood's *Dirty Dusting*. Several things were striking at this visit, which was to become the first of many. The show featured working class characters, in this case office cleaners, in their place of work, who had lives and problems that could easily be identified with by working class people, and my assumption was that working class people made up much of this particular theatre audience. The Royal Court was also using tropes reminiscent of other forms of popular culture, both current and past. For instance, during the interval a screen came down on stage, showing not just front of house and publicity notices (the usual entreaties to turn off mobile phones, marketing notices about upcoming shows and so on), but local advertising, reminiscent of the Pearl and Dean cinema advertising of the 1970s (de Castella, 2010). More surprising still was the auditorium itself and the way the space was used. Food was served to people in their seats before the show and in the interval, and the bar serving alcoholic drinks was situated within the auditorium rather than in a discrete foyer space; both were reminiscent of Victorian theatre and popular music hall. Similarly reminiscent was the encouragement of audience participation and the breaking of the fourth wall throughout the show. The participation itself had several dimensions, including a finale in which the house lights came on and the audience could (and did) get up and dance, becoming performer-participants from their seats. And the seats themselves weren't in the usual rows, but were in clusters around tables, accommodating social groups rather than atomising audience members, and encouraging audience interaction, not just with those paid to perform, but with each other; seats twisted round so that audience members could face each other as well as the stage. The auditorium was more like a bingo hall or a working men's club than a conventional modern theatre space. In summary, there seemed to be a relationship between how the

theatre was enjoyed, its repertoire and its environment, and its ability to attract working class people; and this had the potential for a fascinating study.

Further research suggested that the assumption about the social class of audience members at the Royal Court was supported by empirical evidence. In 2009, The Royal Court undertook an *Economic Impact Analysis* (Royal Court, 2009), which used a range of data including audience data captured at the box office, and postcode analysis of that data. According to this report, the Royal Court attracted audiences of 150,000-200,000 people per year, of whom almost a third (32%; p.2) had previously never been to a theatre show anywhere before. In terms of social class, postcode analysis showed that the Royal Court, Liverpool, attracted people from the most deprived wards of the city (and indeed the country). The analysis revealed that a preponderance of Royal Court audience members came from north Liverpool; 'top ten' postcodes included L12, L4, L9, and L13 (p.6), all of which are in the 'north end' of the city. As the Royal Court states, this is counter to the usual south Liverpool postcodes of 'traditional' theatre attenders in Liverpool.

Liverpool City Council's *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (2010) is useful in putting the Royal Court's north Liverpool postcodes in a socioeconomic context. Compiled a year after the Royal Court report, the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* uses data on a range of indicators (including income, skills, environment and education) from a wide range of sources to assess Liverpool's deprivation against the national picture. Its overall finding in 2010 was that 'Liverpool remains the most deprived Local Authority area in England'. The analysis is broken down by ward. It finds that '[t]he level of deprivation is particularly widespread and severe in neighbourhoods in north Liverpool... where almost all of the neighbourhoods are in the most deprived one or ten per cent' of the UK. Liverpool 4 (Everton and Kirkdale) is particularly deprived, being home to 'the most deprived one per cent nationally'. Theatre at the Royal Court then is not only reaching a high percentage of people who have never

attended the theatre before, but is also reaching people from some of the most deprived areas of the country. As the Royal Court puts it, 'This leads us to believe that audiences are not traditional theatre audiences' (p.6).

These audiences from lower socio-economic groups are in stark contrast to the class origin of the prevailing theatre audience in the UK and elsewhere. According to a plethora of empirical studies over the last twenty-five years (Neelands et al., 2015; Grisolia et al., 2010; Bennett et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2008; Scollen, 2008; Creative Research 2007; Hayes, 2006; McDonnell and Shellard 2006; Millward Brown 1991; amongst others), theatre audiences tend to come from more affluent social groups. This reflects culture attendance in general; on the whole, regular attendance at legitimate culture is still associated with 'higher occupational class positions' (Bennett et al., 2009, p.52), where those from lower socio-economic groups and those who have the least education are least likely to attend cultural events (Bunting et al., 2008; O'Hagan, 1996).

Low engagement with cultural events such as theatre has in policy terms been seen as a 'lack' in what Miles and Sullivan call the deficit model, 'which views non-participants in legitimate culture as an isolated and excluded minority' (2012, p.319), and in need of intervention. This has sometimes been seen as a personal failing, or something appropriate marketing can fix (for example, by Bunting, 2008; Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre, 2009), rather than a structural issue. Where policy interventions have been made, it would appear that ticket price has been assumed to be the barrier. Such interventions include individual schemes such as *A Night Less Ordinary* which targeted free theatre tickets at young people, but also ongoing subsidy aimed at suppressing ticket prices (Austen-Smith, 1980; Peacock, 1994). The irony is, as the Warwick Commission shows, it is those from higher socio-economic groups who actually gain the most benefit from such subsidy (Neelands et al., 2015).



The durable relationship between class and cultural engagement suggests that low engagement with legitimate culture is structural; and the failure to find a solution through pricing mechanisms suggests that the issue is not (or not only) affordability, which suggests the reasons for low engagement with legitimate culture lie elsewhere. The relationship between class and taste is expanded upon in detail in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction* (2010), first published in 1979, Bourdieu collected a wide range of empirical evidence to investigate in some depth the relationship between class, taste, and the preference for particular cultural artefacts and forms. According to Bourdieu, this 'taste' is a socialised preference which is inherited and inculcated through education, and classifies the bearer. In his later work, *Social Space and Symbolic Power* (1989a), Bourdieu discusses cultural consumption as a 'separating mechanism', claiming that consumption of particular cultural artefacts (he gives examples such as drinking wine or champagne, and playing golf) are 'signs of distinction, positive or negative' (p.20). In terms of cultural consumption, Bourdieu suggests that the very environments of major theatres (and, similarly, galleries and museums) serve as separating mechanisms which are perhaps discerned by the working class audience:

Formal refinement...is part of the paraphernalia which always announces the sacred character, separate and separating, of high culture – the icy solemnity of the great museums, the grandiose luxury of the opera-houses and major theatres, the decor and decorum of concert-halls. Everything takes place as if the working class audience vaguely grasped what is implied in conspicuous formality, both in art and in life (2010, p.26).

In *Distinction* (2010) then, Bourdieu suggests culture as a field of struggle in which agents adopt strategies to create distinction. 'Taste' is exhibited within, and reinforced by, the environment of cultural activity, in this case the traditional theatre venue, and the

manifestations and 'paraphernalia' within it that both signal and reinforce ownership of cultural capital. This leads to a socialised, class-related aesthetic preference that is normalised; it also leads to the potential of working class people dropping out of fields that signal their inhospitability, as Webb, Schirato, and Danaher explain:

the design and structure of cultural institutions tend to exclude people who do not have the appropriate background or capital, and [...] they perform this exclusion while giving the appearance of being available to everyone. Working-class people tend not to go to such places because they are not sure how to behave, and the institutions do not make themselves 'user-friendly' (2005, p.153).

Bourdieu further explains the relationship between class and culture with recourse to the 'conceptual triad' (Wacquant, 2006, p.9) of capital, *habitus* and field, concepts which Bourdieu developed throughout his writing. Bourdieu recognised the importance of the transfer of economic capital in creating and preserving class positions, but asserted that other, often less tangible, capitals such as cultural capital were just as important in achieving and defending class positions. Bourdieu sees 'cultural capital' as an adjunct to economic and social capital, acquired firstly via a person's upbringing and (to some extent) supplemented, reinforced or compensated for by education. Cultural capital encompasses not only knowledge of the cultural field and its history (Fowler, 1999), but also an aesthetic sense, or taste. DiMaggio and Mukhtar summarise it as 'an easy familiarity with prestigious forms of culture' (2004, p.170), and note that it is inculcated early in life. They suggest that 'people use the arts as a form of cultural capital to define their identities and manage boundaries within and between status groups' (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004, p.175). Just as being endowed with economic and social capital distinguishes the bearer, so does the acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital. Those who have been able to accumulate

the appropriate cultural capital have the correct, sanctioned understanding of culture, an aesthetic appreciation of art, which Bourdieu calls a 'pure gaze' (2010, p.23), and this is rewarded on an individual basis with symbolic capital via the education system, for example through qualifications. Thus Bourdieu rejects the notion that specific cultural appreciation or 'taste' is in some way 'natural' or a product of individual affinity, 'a matter of direct intuition' as Ahearne (2004, p.17) puts it. Rather it is acquired and symbolic, is culturally specific, and belongs to a class in the same way as do other symbols of class such as clothes, manners or food. For Bourdieu, members of the dominant class 'possess the code of the message' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.45), and it is this they pass on from generation to generation.

For Bourdieu, *habitus* is the socialised sense of entitlement that comes from the embodiment of cultural capital. *Habitus* is the 'structuring structure' (1977, p.72) that gives the bearer a 'feel for the game' which leads to a 'natural' way of behaving within a particular field, a sense of feeling 'at home' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). It allows the bearer to understand the unwritten rules of behaviour, comportment, ritual and appropriate discourse, and inculcates a sense of entitlement, a knowing your place in the field, and a sense of what is (and is not) 'for the likes of you'.

Thus cultural capital forms part of the 'structuring structure' that is the *habitus*, and this is employed to gain advantageous positions within the field. Bourdieu's concept of field then is of an independent sociological space, 'an objective, external structure' (1989b, p.20) in which agents, in possession of varying sorts of *habitus* and amounts of capital appropriate to that field, vie for power; it is a space of 'position takings' (1996, p.231; 1998, p.6).

The work of Bourdieu, particularly his analysis of the relationship between class and culture, is very useful in conceptualising working class attendance at the Royal Court, but also in understanding the way the theatre is used and enjoyed. As has been seen, the more

contemporary empirical research (Hayes, 2006; Creative Research 2007; Scollen, 2008; Bunting et al., 2008) supports Bourdieu's theory on the relationship between class and taste, not only in terms of patterns of attendance, but more significantly suggesting that there is a consciousness of *habitus* or indeed its lack within the field of theatregoing. This empirical research gives a sense that the less regular theatregoer is conscious of unwritten rules which s/he expresses through a preoccupation with dress, convention and other forms of ritual that may seem 'natural' to both the regular theatregoer and those whose *habitus* is valorised in related fields. While *habitus* is difficult, if not impossible, to be reflexive about according to Bourdieu, how this consciousness of cultural capital, *habitus* and the sense of 'knowing your place' within the field of theatregoing is understood is a focus of this thesis. The thesis uses interviews, focus groups and a series of research visits to examine the field of theatregoing and the perception of it by some working class theatregoers. Thick descriptions (Ryle, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Denzin 1989) arising from the field visits were developed, 'permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.vii).

## **Class**

This thesis focuses on the relationship between class and culture, specifically working class people and theatregoing, and what it is about the Royal Court, Liverpool, that makes working class people feel 'at home'. It draws on Bourdieu's work on the relationship between class and cultural consumption. It would be useful then to discuss class in contemporary Britain and identify what is meant by 'working class', but also to address the question of whether questions of class are still relevant.

## What is class?

Class as a concept is notoriously difficult to define. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx split society into two classes relative to ownership of the means of production, i.e. control of economic resources and exploitation (Wright, 1997; Calvert, 1982). These classes are the capitalist class or *bourgeoisie*, who own the means of production and are able to live on the profit gained by the work of others, and the proletariat who do not own the means of production but have 'labour power' (effort and time) which they sell to the capitalist, producing a surplus or profit for the capitalist class. Later Marx introduced the concept of the 'petty *bourgeoisie*', a small, semi-autonomous group who do not rely either on ownership of the means of production nor have to directly sell their labour (for instance, small business owners). According to Olin Wright, the relationship between the capitalist class and the proletariat is one of 'antagonistic interdependence' (1997, p.10), paradoxically based on mutual reliance yet opposing material class interests. It is important to note that Marx saw class not simply as a description, but as a tool by which he could analyse the development of the capitalist system (Calvert, 1982).

Sociologists, from Weber on, developed this concept but saw society as further stratified, not only along the lines of class but also by status and power. Weber's groups do not necessarily share a class interest but may be split, along status lines (for instance the *nouveaux riches* from the landed aristocracy), or by particular causes or non-class interests (for instance feminism or race, which may cut across class interests). This has led to categorisation of classes with different dimensions or subdivisions, such as an educated or technical middle class (Giddens and Mackenzie, 1982) that has 'authority' through its 'delegated' capitalist powers (Wright, 1997, p.16).

There has also been an increase in the categorisation of functional class related to occupation, for instance resulting in subdivisions of the working class into white and blue

collar. As Olin Wright (1997) points out, such functional classification in which occupation is used as a proxy for class (such as Young and Wilmott, 1972; Savage and Miles, 1994) omits large swathes of the population from a class position; anyone who doesn't have an occupation (babies, children, the elderly, and, in the past, many women) therefore have a mediated class related to their family origin, or in the (past) case of married women, their husband's status (Wright, 2000; Reay 1998); it is also an issue for the unemployed, who become an 'underclass'. More significantly for this thesis, E.P. Thompson cautioned against such a statistical construction of class, instead emphasising class 'as a relationship, and not a thing [...] a social and cultural formation' that takes place over time (1980, p.10), rather than something that 'is' in a snapshot. Indeed, this functionalist way of dividing people by economic status is particularly unsatisfying for sociologists, not least because it says little about the lived experience of class. This thesis is much more concerned with the lived experience of class and how class is practised and performed in the setting of a theatre.

Bourdieu introduced a new dimension to the understanding of class that went beyond economic determinism. Like Marx, Bourdieu recognised the importance of the ownership and distribution of what he would call economic capital, but he also expanded on the importance of other forms of capital, such as cultural, social and symbolic capital, appropriate to particular social universes or 'fields' (1987). In addition, where Marx posits a 'class consciousness' based on shared interests in an economic space, Bourdieu sees classes and class interests as much more fractured, given that individuals are also divided along other 'principles' (gender, race, nationality; but also 'principles imposed by...ordinary experience' (1987, p.7) such as occupation, local issues and rivalries and so on). Bourdieu's conception of capitals and their utility in different fields, and his notion of *habitus*, the body in which class experience is written, removed the simple determinism of class position and allowed for agency within a structure. Moreover, as Diane Reay suggests, by incorporating capitals such as cultural capital, Bourdieu 'shifts [the concept of class] from the arena of

production to that of consumption' (1998, p.262). As mentioned above, in several works and principally in *Distinction* (2010), Bourdieu investigated in some depth the class relationship with consumption, examining the formation and development of aesthetic knowledge and 'taste' and seeing consumption as performative of class. These issues are of particular interest to this thesis which investigates consumption of a cultural product by a particular class, and are further developed in Chapter 4.

Many researchers have drawn on and expanded Bourdieu's ideas about class as performed through taste, consumption and practice. Most significantly, Bennett et al.'s multi-method survey of class and taste in Britain (2009) suggests that class is still very much bound up with taste and indeed participation, with working class contributors less likely to take part in a range of valorised cultural activities such as museum, art gallery and theatre attendance (p.199), and more likely to dislike valorised forms of 'legitimate culture' (p.212) such as modern literature. This is seen as a key challenge by the Warwick Commission (Neelands et al., 2015). Most recently, *The Great British Class Survey* (Savage et al., 2013) has posited seven distinct classes, recognising a 'Technical Middle Class' and Standing's idea of a 'precariat' (2011) alongside more traditional Marxist-sounding fractions such as an 'Elite', an 'Established Middle Class' and a 'Traditional Working Class'. As discussed above, this reclassification into strata is not in itself radical. More interesting, and particularly so for this thesis, are the methods by which class was classified by Savage and his team, which drew on a Bourdieusian model of class to include not only income or occupation, but also on other forms of capital such as social and cultural capital. Savage et al.'s model of class is 'a multi-dimensional construct' (2013, p.223) that, as Reay suggested, is as much about consumption (and culture as distinction) as it is about ownership of the means of production.

## **Decline of the discussion of class**

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the discussion of class, having once held what Farber calls a 'privileged position within sociology' (2005, p.2), became marginalised (Reay, 1998; Rowbotham and Beynon, 2001; Farber, 2005; Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood, 2008; Savage et al., 2013; Biressi and Nunn, 2013). In terms of sociology as a discipline, Biressi and Nunn put this down to a 'post-Marxist "turn"' (2013, p.13) in both sociology and cultural studies that rejected economic determinism, while Rowbotham and Beynon (2001) suggest that from the mid-1980s, social class was displaced by gender, race and ethnicity as issues deserving serious analysis in social and cultural studies. Both are partial reasons for this decline in interest in class as a focus of study, as is the broader social and political context.

While it is true that issues such as race and gender needed and received increased (if perhaps not sufficient) attention, other reasons can be seen for the apparent neglect of social class by looking beyond the academy to the wider political, social and economic environment of post-industrial Britain. A discourse in which Britain was presented as a meritocracy became dominant, and poverty was increasingly seen as an excuse for personal failings, rather than a result of the structural issues that the post-war consensus had identified and perhaps had started to address. Such pronouncements were supported by theorists; Saunders, drawing on fellow sociologist Michael Young's 1958 dystopia *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033*, talked about 'the myth of class rigidity' (1996, p.4), and maintained the notion that class was an excuse for a personal failure to live up to one's potential. Saunders' assertion was robustly challenged, notably by Breen and Goldthorpe (2002), but the idea that class origin is insignificant to an individual's social status when compared with the individual's own resources (that is, personal effort coupled with intellectual capacity) was resilient. The notion that poverty or lack of economic success is



due to personal failings, and the near obliteration of discourse around the inbuilt disadvantages of a structural system, are still prevalent in official public discourse and some sections of the press.

Related to neoliberal policy and a discourse of individual responsibility was a weakening of class identity, in what Pakulski and Waters (1996) concluded was a 'decomposition' of class. This weakening class identity is evidenced by a declining trade union membership and a decline in class-based politics according to Voigt (2007). Voigt, drawing on Marcuse, suggests the reason for this decline was an atomisation of workforces that is an inevitable result of a change from valuing physical labour to valuing intellectual labour in an increasingly technological economy. Related to this was a growing electoral weakness of the Labour Party, and indeed a decline of the Labour movement itself (Savage and Miles, 1994). Like Voigt, Savage and Miles suggest this was due to social changes, particularly a decline in numbers of the working class, pointing towards a decline in manual workers from the 1960s on (1994, p.11). For Reay (1998), this was due to a decline of collective action related to a growth of individualism.

Similarly to Reay, Imogen Tyler sees this weakening class identity and indeed the growth of a discourse of blame with its 'undeserving poor', not as a 'natural' evolution but rather as a purposeful strategy. Tyler suggests it is as a result of a 'three-decade long struggle on the part of the elites to jettison class as the lens through which to perceive and contest social and economic inequalities' (2015, p.497). Purposeful or not, it is no surprise that in an atmosphere of neoliberal policy, meritocratic discourse, and weakening class identity, that class was discussed less in sociological circles just as it was in wider society. The erasure of class from discourse is significant; as Bourdieu suggests, '[t]he existence or non-existence of classes is one of the major stakes in the political struggle' (1987, p.9).

## Resurgence

As early as 1994, Savage and Miles were trying to reclaim the importance of class as a study with their book *The Remaking of the British Working Class*, a furtherance of E.P.

Thompson's seminal project, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1980, originally 1963). Ten years later, class and the analysis of equality would again emerge as an important part of sociological enquiry, according to Savage et al. (2013). They attribute this revival of interest in class to empirical phenomena, such as growing inequality of both wealth and income in British society, as well as the visibility of other indicators of inequality such as educational attainment and housing. In parallel with growing inequality, throughout the 1990s there was what Tyler calls a 'resurgence of class-based antagonisms' (2015, p.503). Examples are the adoption of 'chav', a derogatory term for/conception of working class people, and the sanctioned distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. This is the foundation for, and is exacerbated by, a salacious interest in working class behaviour and taste on the part of television producers and tabloid newspapers with their 'prole porn' (a term coined in 2008 by columnist Mick Hume of *The Times* to describe the lurid interest in the case of Shannon Matthews, a working class girl abducted by her own family for their personal gain). Class has re-emerged as a 'problem', although framed more in terms of individual weakness or fecklessness reminiscent of the Victorian undeserving poor rather than as a structural challenge.

Most recently, the sociological discussion of class has also become more visible in the public realm, with several studies gaining prominence. The public impact of Savage et al.'s large scale research project in partnership with the BBC, the *Great British Class Survey*, and of some of the analysis that has emerged from it such as Friedman, O'Brien, and Laurison's (2016) analysis of social mobility – or its lack – in the acting profession have increased and made more visible the wider discourse on class beyond academia. Issues around lack of

diversity and social inclusion in culture demonstrated by The Warwick Commission's work on cultural value (Neelands, 2015) were also widely picked up. As Payne put it about the public response to the Great British Class Survey, rather than class as an issue being 'dead': 'it was more the case that "Class is dead" is dead' (2013, p.3).

Despite this resurgence of interest in inequality in both academia and the public realm, the word 'class' is often elided in public and political discourse. Bennett et al. (2009, p.210) notice its erasure from discourse by some working class people themselves, drawing on Savage to suggest that 'as class divisions intensify structurally, so the awareness of class becomes muted'. Nonetheless, as Bennett et al. suggest, an awareness of the concept of class is evident, as is an awareness of taste as a classifier, and related to this an awareness of the symbolic violence of cultural exclusion. While the word itself may be under erasure, the 'problem' of class remains. As Savage and Miles conclude, 'For so long as we live in an unequal society, in which some people exploit others, class divisions are likely to have profound political ramifications' (1994, p.90).

In summary, class is a real and persistent concept in social and political life. It is variously measured and understood, as economic and cultural, objective and subjective and, even as a methodological construct. The Royal Court, Liverpool, through its cultivation of a working class audience, provides a useful locus to explore the lived and performative experience of class at a theatre, in a cultural space that working class people may be assumed to find unwelcoming. The success of the cultivation of a working class audience by the Royal Court is evidenced by the postcode data from the Royal Court's *Economic Impact Analysis* (2009), which demonstrates that theatregoers come from some of the most deprived wards in the country (Liverpool City Council, 2010). The thesis thus draws on the classificatory model of social class, but with the intention of exploring the lived experience of class, culture and taste in contemporary Britain.

## **Existing research on theatre audiences – and on audiences and class**

As the relationship between class and theatre at the Royal Court, Liverpool, hinges on its audiences and their experience of the Theatre, it is useful to place this examination within the field of existing audience research. Despite what Freshwater (2009, p.2) calls the 'indispensable' relationship between theatre and audience, research about theatre audiences remains a relatively small field. In their recent introduction to a special issue on theatre audiences in the journal *Participations*, Reason and Sedgman (2015, p.118) comment on the paucity of 'empirical research into living audiences', although they close with some optimism about its growth. There has indeed been some welcome expansion in recent years, not least because of Matthew Reason's own contribution (2004; 2006; 2008; Reason and Reynolds, 2010). Reason's main focus has been around how audiences, and particularly audiences of children, experience theatre, and within this he has experimented with and developed some distinctive methodologies (for instance using drawing as a method to understand how children engage with puppets, in Reason, 2008).

Similarly, Ben Walmsley's work (2011; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; Walmsley and Franks, 2011) has also widened the field. His detailed engagement with audience members provides a deep and rich understanding of experiences of theatregoing and people's personal relationships with theatre. For instance, he reports what their engagement with actors means to some audience members: one woman 'spoke of a "humbling sense of privilege" of being in the presence of actors, both during their performances and in post-show discussions' (2011, p.13). In the same paper, he discusses the importance of pre-theatre ritual to one research participant, and reports how another varies her outfits according to venue and art form.

A particular contribution of Walmsley's has been in illuminating issues around motivation for theatregoing (2011; 2012; Walmsley and Franks, 2011), broadening out the range of motivating factors for instance to include emotional experiences and impact. Related to

motivation, recent years have seen a rise in the number of studies around impact and value, terms which are often elided (see Belfiore, 2014). These build on but also provide alternative narratives to the cultural impact studies of the 1980s and '90s, which were largely instrumentalist in that they focused on the social or economic benefits of culture and its institutions to wider society (for instance, Myerscough, 1988, and his regional discussions of the economic importance of the arts). In *The Social Impact of the Arts* (2008), Belfiore and Bennett capture many of the contemporary debates about audiences and how they value (or are perceived to value) the arts, and are particularly useful in framing these debates in a theoretical and historical perspective. The new generation of empirical studies in this area focuses on the short or long term intrinsic impact on individuals of attending or participating in cultural events. Brown and Novak's study of university theatre audiences in the USA (2007) developed a framework by which impacts on theatre audiences – such as 'captivation', 'intellectual stimulation' and 'social bonding' (pp.9-10) – could be measured. Brown and Novak also suggested a link between an audience member's 'preparedness' (p.22) and their ability to get the most out of a theatrical event (the relationship between this and a mobilisation of capital is reminiscent of McCarthy et. al.'s findings about the benefits of post-show discourse in *Gifts of the Muse*, 2004). Brown and Novak's framework broke new ground, which was subsequently extended or supplemented by others including the New Economics Foundation, and Bakhshi and Throsby (both in Carnworth and Brown, 2014).

Many of the studies above look at the positive aspects to the theatregoing experience. A small number of studies have also contributed to the picture of some of the discomfort people experience around theatregoing, or of what may be termed non-theatregoing. *The Arts Debate*, undertaken by Creative Research in 2007, was 'the Arts Council England's first public value enquiry' (Bunting et al., 2008). While it was not specifically focused on theatre, but examined the general public's attitudes to the arts in general, it is nonetheless useful in

illuminating attitudes to the arts and to theatre attendance. Respondents disclose a range of anxieties about attendance at all kinds of arts events, for instance about the cost of the event, peer pressure, feelings of exclusion, uncertainty about how to 'do' the arts, what they will understand, who else will be there, and how the event will unfold. In Australia, Rebecca Scollen's work (2008) provides a depth of insight into how theatre is experienced from the point of view of a group of non-theatre-goers. Scollen examined how her research participants perceived theatre before exposing them to a theatre event; she then studied how they felt about the experience of attending their first show. Scollen's study is distinctive in exposing some of the discomfort felt by non-theatre-goers across the whole theatre-going event, from anticipation, through worrying about not being able to 'relate to the other theatre patrons' (p.17) and anxiety about dress, to the importance of post-show discourse.

As seen so far, many of the qualitative audience studies have in common the relationship between audiences and how they experience (value, are impacted by) what is on stage. However, some studies have a wider scope, focussing on how theatre audiences experience what Sauter describes as 'the theatrical event' (2002, p.127; 2004, p.11). These encompass what Susan Bennett (1998, pp.139-140) calls 'the outer frame', which 'contains all [the] cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event', and which form the expectation of the audience member. Bennett for instance follows the audience, in a 'threshold' to 'post-performance' progression (1998, pp.125-165). Similarly, Schechner briefly refers to the approach to (and exit from) the theatre from an audience perspective, noting the importance of the 'preparations for performance' spectators make, '(deciding to attend, dressing, going, settling in, waiting) and what happens after a performance' (2004, p. xviii). Walmsley (2013b) further develops Brown and Novak's framework to include temporality, encompassing the collected ephemera of theatre-going such as ticket stubs, programmes and so on. Marvin Carlson (1989) looks wider still, discussing in detail the

relationship between audience and the theatre building and the urban space in which it is situated. These studies illuminate the wider theatregoing experience, capturing the breadth of what Brown and Novak call the 'extrinsic' experience of theatre, that is 'everything that happens around the program itself' (2007, p.17). These issues are important to a sense of *habitus*, where 'deciding to attend' or the relationship with the urban space of a theatre is already informed by an individual's disposition, itself shaped by an individual's experience, especially its inheritance from the family and through education.

The question of class (like other issues of audience diversity such as race and ethnicity) tends not to be discussed in any depth in the qualitative research. For instance, while Scollen's study includes different social classes in her research sample, her results do not distinguish on the basis of class, instead treating 'non-theatregoers' (p.17) as a single group, albeit that she acknowledges the group is non-homogenous. Similarly, Creative Research's sample (2007) was structured to include a wide range of people from different socio-economic groups, but does not make explicit the social origins or attendance status of those expressing an opinion. Reason's 2006 study of young audiences does mention social class in the context of the diversity of the research participants; and his paper with Reynolds on dance audiences (2010) acknowledges class as an issue but one that can't be pursued in that paper; similarly, Walmsley mentions class tangentially as part of the participation agenda (2013a). Within Reason and Sedgman's special issue of *Participations* (2015), Wilkinson's research reveals the importance of identification and class representation on stage to one working class theatregoer/research participant. Class then is acknowledged as an issue, but one that is rarely explored in detail as a specific concern. In other words, in a growing wealth of audience literature, the lived experience of the theatrical event is rarely explored from a class perspective.

A significant exception is Stewart's (2012) study of what he calls the 'silver disposition' of theatregoers in West Sussex in which his explicit aim is to investigate the middle class theatre experience. In *Culture and the Middle Classes*, Stewart analyses a range of cultural practices from a classed perspective, interestingly for this thesis using Bourdieu as a lens. Like Bennett et al. (2009), Stewart finds that the link between class and taste remains, with middle class people mobilising their cultural capital through consumption of valorised forms of art such as the 'highbrow'. Stewart's insights on Bourdieu's three 'competing principles of legitimacy' (1983, p.331) in the cultural field have been useful in further understanding the concept of field which is discussed in Chapter 4 (see particularly Figure 10).

Finally, some quantitative studies, and analyses that build on their data, are relevant to this discussion. As seen so far, much of the qualitative work has moved audience studies away from a deficit model of audience motivation which had been focused on 'barriers to attendance' (such as the nonetheless useful study by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2009). The quantitative research however still tends to focus on a 'lack' (Miles and Sullivan, 2012, p.319). The very valuable *Taking Part* survey, conducted by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2013), includes data on theatre attendance. *Taking Part* is a significant annual large scale (and now longitudinal) study now in its tenth year. It explores 'how people attend the arts today, and the socio-demographic factors that have an impact on that attendance' (Bunting et al, 2008, p.7). This approach has been important in giving a partial understanding of the relationship between attending cultural events in relation to a range of demographics, including social status, and providing the basis for interpretation. For instance, Bunting et al.'s 2008 study, *From Indifference to Enthusiasm* uses the *Taking Part* data to examine 'the socio-demographic factors that have an impact on [arts] attendance' (Bunting et al., 2008, p.7). It finds that '[t]wo of the most important factors in determining whether somebody attends arts activities are education and social status – the



higher an individual's level of education and social status, the more likely they are to have high levels of arts attendance' (Bunting et al., 2008, p.7). The study suggests this is for 'psychological reasons', concluding 'that many people believe that the arts are "not for people like me"' (Bunting et al., 2008, p.8). The later longitudinal study (Prior, Matthews, and Charlton, 2015) confirms links between high and low arts attendance and social status (measured by employment and home ownership). Both the data and the subsequent analyses are useful in demonstrating that arts attendance remains an issue of class in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain as it was for Bourdieu's 1960s' France. While the longitudinal survey sheds some light on individual reasons for declining arts attendance (for instance people having more or less time, having competing interests, and childcare demands), none of the studies focus on structural issues of non-attendance for those of lower socio-economic groups; Bunting et al.'s 2008 analysis instead sees the phenomenon as an individual issue for those who don't attend, and one which arts institutions need to address through improved marketing messages. And of course such quantitative studies do not address how the theatre that *is* attended by working class people is experienced.

In summary, there is a range of audience research that illuminates how audience members experience what is on stage, and/or how audience members experience a theatregoing event, however broadly or narrowly that is defined. Some of the ethnographic research (Creative Research, 2007; Scollen, 2008; Bunting et al., 2008) gives insights into anxieties people express about arts attendance, such as dress code, rituals, etiquette, how the process works, and who other attenders will be, although it does not distinguish on the basis of class. That is to say, agents in the field appear aware of the subtle signs and manifestations (tangible and non-tangible) telling them that theatre is not their field; they are aware of sharing the experience with others who have what they perceive to be the correct *habitus* and who may not be like them (Bunting et al 2008), and are concerned that their *habitus* will betray their lack of appropriate cultural capital. Other anxieties, as

Charlesworth points out (2000, p.143), may be difficult for people to put into words. This leads to the difficulty of investigating that which is generally unstated and unthought; as Bourdieu asked about *habitus*: ‘how, for example, might we ask people to reflect on aspects of their lives that they themselves are unaware of, that are “beyond the grasp of consciousness”, and “cannot even” - or perhaps one should say cannot easily – “be made explicit”’ (Bourdieu 1977, p.94, in Sweetman, 2009, p.12; Sweetman’s emphasis). This study aims to do that using some of these issues to inform the research. Themes emerging from the literature relating to class and Bourdieu’s conceptual triad were used to analyse the ethnographic data collected for this study, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2; the themes themselves are listed in *Appendix 6: Themes used in analysing ethnographic data*.

### **Value of Study/Original contribution to knowledge**

Given the growing wealth of theatre audience studies it is useful to reflect on the need for this particular study. This study is distinct from the studies discussed above for three reasons: one, the breadth of the study beyond what is on stage to encompass a wider ‘theatregoing event’; secondly, the dimension of class; and finally, the methodological design. These are discussed in turn here.

While this study builds on an ethnographic tradition of reception studies that examine how audience members feel about and perceive theatre, it is wider than those studies tend to be. The focus is not only on the ‘theatrical event’, that unique relationship between performer/performance and audience (Sauter, 2002), but rather the whole theatregoing experience, to include the theatre building, its public spaces, its auditorium, and its place in the field of Liverpool theatregoing and the perceptions of its audience members, as much as what is on stage. This gives a holistic picture of theatregoing that captures the ‘intrinsic’ experience of the show but also the breadth of its ‘extrinsic’ experience (Brown and Novak, 2007, p.17).

The second reason this study is distinctive is the dimension of class. While there are ethnographic studies of how people (theatre-goers and non-theatre-goers from a range of socio-economic backgrounds) experience and think about theatre-going (Reason 2004; Hayes, 2006; Creative Research, 2007; Bunting et al., 2008; Scollen, 2008; Walmsley, 2011; Stewart, 2012), none focus specifically on the working class theatre-goer or on the audience perspective of what might be called working class theatre. Where class is examined in (or as a result of) quantitative studies, it tends to be in terms of 'lack' of attendance or appropriate habit or skills as part of the 'deficit model' of cultural participation (Miles and Sullivan, 2012, p.319). This ethnographic study aims to fill those gaps. In 2002, Sauter suggested that in the past, 'Audience researchers have surveyed people waiting to enter the theatre, but have failed to join them in the auditorium in order to find out what they had actually experienced during the theatrical event'. While he points out this was no longer the case for theatre audiences in general due to the growth in reception studies, it still seems to be the case for working class theatre audiences. This study will follow working class audience members into the auditorium and, using a range of ethnographic methods, will attempt to understand and record that experience. The aim is to understand what it is about the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, that makes working class people feel 'at home'. Finally, the study is methodologically distinctive, using as it does a single case study of a theatre venue, and examining it from several perspectives using a range of methods.

## **Conclusion**

Empirical data from a range of sources (McDonnell and Shellard 2006; Chan et al., 2008; Bunting et al., 2008) suggests working class people are less likely to engage regularly with theatre. However, the Royal Court, Liverpool is countering such trends, as evidenced by its Economic Impact study (2009). Moreover, evidence of both repeat attendance, and the observation of behaviour in the auditorium such as participation, suggest that working class

audience members feel at home in this theatre space. It appears that the Royal Court is providing an experience and/or an environment that allows this, and enables the Royal Court to attract and retain non-theatre-going audience members from working class backgrounds. Thus the Royal Court, Liverpool, provides a useful locus to discover how working class people may be made to feel welcome despite being in a cultural field that may be predicted to make them feel uncomfortable, to understand how they are experiencing theatre, and to further explore what that tells us about Bourdieu's claims about the relationship between class and taste.

This thesis then aims to discover how people experience theatre at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, and what it is about this specific theatre that signals, not 'icy solemnity', but a welcoming social space that allows working class people, with their particular *habitus* and ownerships of capitals, to feel at home. It also investigates how the history of the Theatre has shaped its place in the imaginary of class in Liverpool. It aims to understand the implications of the Royal Court's success for cultural policy, and for theatre marketing. Finally, it asks what such an analysis of the field of theatre tells us about Bourdieu's conceptual triad.

This thesis does this first by examining the history of Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool to put the theatre in context (Chapter 3), to introduce issues around trajectory and field, and to demonstrate how an agent struggles to gain and maintain a place in a crowded field. The ensuing three chapters use Bourdieu's conceptual triad in order to understand the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, specifically how it is positioned in the field, how it is perceived, and how it is programmed, and how this may affect the perception of working class audience members. The first of these (Chapter 4) uses Bourdieu's concept of *champ* or field as a method by which to understand what is at stake in the field, and how the Royal Court relates to other building-based theatres in Liverpool. The second (Chapter 5), focuses on

what Bennett (1998, pp.139-140) calls ‘the outer frame’ of the theatregoing experience, specifically looking at the Royal Court’s building and its physical and imaginary space in the city. This reveals information about the sorts of *habitus* that are comfortable in the Royal Court Theatre. The third of these (Chapter 6) examines the repertoire and the audience’s relationship to it and to what happens on stage, and through this reveals the types of cultural capital that are valued at the Royal Court. A short Afterword (Chapter 7) gives a brief update on the Royal Court Theatre.

This study is distinctive in its breadth, encompassing the wider ‘theatregoing event’; in viewing this through the lens of class; and because of its methodological design. The methods used are discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2. Methods

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will identify and discuss the methods that have been used to investigate what is happening at the Royal Court, Liverpool, and how audience members are experiencing theatre there. Given the complexity of the theatregoing experience which includes audience members' conceptions and preconceptions, the theatre's history and place in the field, the artefacts and symbols of the venue, I felt a multi-method approach would be most effective. The main approach is a series of field visits to the venue. These observed a range of phenomena including the building, auditorium, theatre repertoire and how the event was engaged in by theatregoers. The field visits resulted in thick descriptions of each event. This approach is supplemented by tools of qualitative research (focus groups, supplemented with in depth interviews; analysis of audience comments on TripAdvisor, a social media site) in order to understand what it is about the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, that makes working class audience members feel 'at home'.

## Field visits and thick descriptions

Field visits were judged to be a useful method to facilitate understanding of the variety of signs (manifest and perceived) that demonstrate ownership or otherwise of the appropriate cultural capital and *habitus* at the Royal Court. Contemporaneous notes of each theatre visit were taken, and written up into thick descriptions (Ryle, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Denzin 1989). According to Cho and Trent (2006, p.328), thick description ‘focuses on explicating the unique, idiosyncratic meanings and perspectives constructed by individuals, groups, or both who live/act in a particular context’. Thick descriptions themselves involve what Denzin calls ‘experience-near concepts and terms’ (1989, p.87), that is, the use of everyday language to vividly describe real experiences. Denzin, drawing on Geertz, contrasts such descriptions as coming ‘naturally’, as if from an ‘informant’, as opposed to using the technical language of the expert (1989, p.87). Excerpts from thick descriptions are presented in succeeding chapters in an attempt to create a visual picture of the event, the auditorium, and the audience members, and also to capture interactions, sometimes between audience members including dialogue, and how those audience members relate with what is on stage. Thus they combine ‘situational’, (Denzin, 1989, pp. 93-94), ‘relational’ (p.94) and ‘interactional’ (p.95) thick description. In addition, the descriptive-interpretive aspect of thick description (1989, p.99, p.101) is used on occasion to put the event into a cultural context to attempt to reveal its meaning. This leads to ‘thick interpretation’ and consequently ‘thick meaning’ of the findings (Ponterotto, 2006, p.543). A longer extract from a thick description is given in *Appendix 1: Thick Description*.

Cho and Trent (2006) note that thick description depends on prolonged engagement. The sampling frame for the thick description is one year of shows at the Royal Court, Liverpool. I attended one performance of each of the shows in the 2013/4 season (n=11 shows; see

Table 1: Shows attended in the Royal Court, Liverpool's 2013-2014 'season' for more details of each show). Each show runs for between three to four weeks, with an extended run for the Christmas show. The selection attended was structured to include a variety of mid-run performances as well as first and last nights of runs. In addition, two *Variety Lunches*, i.e. matinee cabaret performances that take place at lunchtimes, were also attended. Thick description was then used to describe and analyse the theatre venue on the occasion of each performance.

### **Season selected**

In 2013-14, the Royal Court had a rolling programme of shows rather than a distinct season or seasons. This is in contrast to other theatres in the field of Liverpool theatre such as the Everyman Playhouse and the Unity Theatre, both of which usually programme their seasons from October through to the Christmas show or pantomime, followed by a spring to summer season, with a 'dark' period in summer. (The dark period allows theatres to undertake maintenance and schedule staff leave at a time of traditionally lower audience numbers, due to competition from warm weather and holidays.) In contrast, at the Royal Court, shows were presented throughout June and July, culminating in an August opening for *Lennon*, a show about the life of Beatle John Lennon that has been presented several times at the Royal Court. Shows continued in September with no real break (see

Table 1).

As there was apparently no official start or end date of the Royal Court season, *Ladies Day*, which opened in June 2013, was selected as a starting point for the research, and one year's worth of shows was considered a season. The show *Lennon*, which was shown just over a year later, was then added, as discussions with audience members throughout the



season suggested that many saw it as an iconic and emblematic Royal Court show. Finally, in January 2016, I returned to the Theatre for a Heritage Tour to see the changes that had been made to the building in the refurbishment of its public areas.

Table 1: Shows attended in the Royal Court, Liverpool's 2013-2014 'season'<sup>1</sup>

	Show	Writer	Director	Dates	Cast	Comments
1	<i>Ladies Day</i>	Amanda Whittington	Ken Alexander	14 Jun - 13 Jul	Roxanne Pallett, Lynn Francis, Eithne Brown, Angela Simms, Jack Lord	Play originally written for Hull Truck theatre company and set in York, but adapted with Liverpool references substituted
2	<i>Bouncers</i>	John Godber	Bob Eaton	19 Jul - 17 Aug	Mark Womack, Michael Starke, Paul Broughton, Danny O'Brien	A reprise of one of the Royal Court's favourite shows
3	<i>Sons of the Desert</i>	None credited	Ken Alexander	27 Sep - 26 Oct	Michael Starke, Roy Brandon, Matt Connor, Lori Haley Fox, Jonathan Markwood, Penelope Woodman	'a fantasy "Variety" bill as a warm up...very loosely based on the type of live variety shows in which Stan and Ollie were touring the UK in 1932, 1947, 1952 and 1953' (Alexander, in Christie, 2013c)
4	<i>Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley</i> <sup>2</sup>	Fred Lawless ( <i>Slappers and Slap Heads</i> )	Ken Alexander	22 Nov - 11 Jan	Michael Starke, Lindzi Germain, Lynn Francis, Angela Simms, Jack Rigby	"A Great Night Out it will be" – Yoda'; 'Court's riotous run of Scouse comedy spoofs' (Alexander, in Christie, 2013a)

<sup>1</sup> Information taken from Royal Court Theatre programmes (Christie 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2013d; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2014d; 2014e)

<sup>2</sup> Fazakerley is a north Liverpool suburb known for its housing estates, hospital and prison. 'It has a relatively high level of overall deprivation, [with] 62.1% of the ward falling into the most deprived 10% nationally' (Liverpool City Council, 2015).

5	<i>Once a Catholic</i>	Mary O'Malley	Kathy Burke	22 Jan - 8 Feb	Molly Logan, Katherine Rose Morley, Amy Morgan, Cecilia Noble, Richard Bremmer, Clare Cathcart, Calum Callaghan	Co-production with the Tricycle. 'There's not a Scouse accent in earshot in this production – what a change that makes' (Made Up, 2014)
6	<i>Variety Lunch 1</i>			29 Jan	Joe Slater, Mickey Finn	A crooner, a comedian, and Scouse
7	YNWA <sup>3</sup>	Nicky Allt	Bob Eaton	7 - 29 March	Mark Moraghan, Lindzi Germain, Jake Abraham, Lenny Wood, Rachel Rae	'The Official history of LFC'
8	<i>Variety Lunch 2</i>			26 Mar	Crooner: 'Perfectly Frank' (David Knopoff), comedian	A crooner, a comedian and scouse 2
9	<i>Special Measures</i>	Mark Davies Markham	Ken Alexander	4 Apr - 3 May	Paul Broughton, Eithne Browne, Stephen Fletcher, Michael Starke, Angela Sim, Colin Hoult	Polemical piece about teachers and a Tory government minister
10	<i>Sex and the Suburbs</i>	Claire Sweeney, Mandy Mullen	Ken Alexander	9 May - 7 Jun	Claire Sweeney, Carl Patrick	Local writer, local landmarks
11	<i>Lennon</i>	Bob Eaton	Bob Eaton	13 Jun - 19 Jul	John Power, Tom Connor, Mark Newnham, Kirsten Foster	Another reprise of a Royal Court favourite show

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<sup>3</sup> YNWA is a commonly-used acronym for *You'll Never Walk Alone*, Liverpool Football Club's crowd-sung, sentimental anthem to solidarity. The anthem was appropriated from Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel* by 1960s' Liverpool beat group Gerry and the Pacemakers, and adopted by fans of the football club. The acronym has gained traction as a hashtag on social media denoting Club support and solidarity with the Hillsborough campaign.

The Royal Court management was generous in providing tickets to many of the shows in the season, which allowed the field visits to take place; I bought other tickets. Once arranged by the Marketing Manager, tickets were left at the box office for me to pick up, and I was treated like any other audience member which gave me the ability to experience the theatregoing event in a similar way to others. The only exceptions were the first *Variety Lunch* visit, when I was greeted by the Marketing Manager and a discussion was had about the nature of the audience, and just before the start of *Sex and the Suburbs* where I chanced upon the Royal Court's Chief Executive, and a brief discussion was had about the selection of the repertoire. Notes were taken to inform thick descriptions in both cases. Royal Court staff have neither asked for nor seen the notes or descriptions.

For each show, I attempted to get to the theatre as early as possible, to immerse myself in the pre-show experience from within the audience and to get a sense of the atmosphere. I chatted with other audience members seated nearby, in public areas, and outside where audience members smoked during intervals. Notes were taken on a smartphone to be uploaded and expanded upon in the following days. Notes attended to several areas: the theatre venue and its use (exterior of the building, public areas, auditorium, décor and artefacts); the audience (dress, social groupings, behaviour, response to the show); and the show itself (tropes, representation). On several occasions I also took photographs as *aides memoire* but also to enable closer scrutiny of what was taking place. Some of these have been used as illustrations in this thesis.

There were some issues with collecting notes. These were minor, but worth noting. On the one hand, I was an audience member and was to an extent immersed in a similar experience to other audience members. However, there were several differences. Firstly, I was conspicuous as one of the few audience members who arrived at the Royal Court alone. This had some advantages as people tended to make conversation, sharing their views of the venue and the

show; they also offered me drinks and even to share their food, demonstrating the convivial atmosphere and making me one of their own. It nonetheless engendered a certain apartness from the audience in their social groupings. Secondly, I was there with a very different purpose from other audience members, and this made for a sort of out of body experience, at once being within the body of the audience and at the same time outside of it, as if watching from above. This was exacerbated when I took photographs. While audience members did occasionally take photographs before the show, during intervals or afterwards, these tended to be 'selfies' or group photographs rather than, for instance, pictures of the set, auditorium or audience. My taking photographs of the auditorium and especially of the audience then was unusual and possibly appeared odd.

There were also practical considerations. Before, during and after each show, I took notes on a smartphone, and the illumination of this could also be conspicuous as the house lights dimmed. During the shows, this meant moving to the back of the audience to unsold or ushers' seats so the light and action did not disturb other audience members. This again meant I was both part of the audience and apart from it. Another practical issue was that it could be difficult to keep up with note-taking during shows as several interesting phenomena were happening simultaneously, or were coming thick and fast on top of each other. Despite these limitations, I was able to remain (a)part of the audience, and at some points found myself immersed in the moment, or moved by what was being presented, while for the most part maintaining an interested objectivity.

Finally, there is a level of subjectivity with the interpretation of observed phenomena. In the theatre space and afterwards, it was always difficult to know whether a phenomenon was observed because it was being looked for; or, when it was observed, whether it was 'correctly' interpreted. Clifford Geertz famously sets the problem of an observed wink, asking whether it is

a contraction of the eye or 'a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking conspiracy is in motion' (1973, p.312). Like Geertz's wink, phenomena recorded by the researcher, such as 'a laugh of recognition', beg the question 'whose recognition'? And could it be the researcher's opinion that there was recognition, rather than the audience's opinion? – a laugh certainly happened, but is this what it meant? There is also the difficulty of knowing that multiple phenomena were presumably occurring but were not being recorded as they were happening simultaneously; or else the researcher was not looking for them and so not observing them. Thick descriptions are no less valid because of this (Cho and Trent, 2006), and prolonged engagement meant observing similar phenomena repeatedly (audience members tended to laugh at local jokes more than political jokes; evening audiences laughed at swearing but less at sexism, where for the lunchtime audiences this was reversed), which led to some sense of confirmation. It was also useful to draw on photographs to confirm and draw out visual memory, and the data from other research methods, to give a richer picture of various phenomena and their importance to the Royal Court audience members from their own perspectives. An extract from a thick description is given in *Appendix 1: Thick Description*.

### **Photographic record**

As mentioned, photographs were taken of the auditorium and the audience at each visit to the Royal Court, Liverpool, as *aides memoires* to each event. In addition, an extensive number of photographs were taken at the second *Variety Lunch* event, assisted by the daytime lighting conditions. These recorded a photo-journey from the nearby shopping centre car park, around the theatre exterior, through the theatre public spaces and into the auditorium. The main questions I was seeking responses to through the photographs were: how does the building of the Royal Court, Liverpool, relate to the city? How is the auditorium used by audience members? What are the artefacts the theatre displays, and what significance do the artefacts

have? How do they signal to the audience members? And for all of these questions, how can these signals be perceived by audience members? The photographs were useful in helping me to perceive the journey from an 'outside' perspective, as well as to examine specific, visual elements of the theatregoing experience including the journey to the theatre; they helped me to see what I may not have otherwise seen. Some of these photographs are used in this thesis to illustrate these points.

## **Qualitative research**

Alongside the main research method of field visits, the plan was to undertake focus groups or interviews as a way of corroborating or challenging the data collected, and to understand theatregoing at the Royal Court from the perspective of Royal Court audience members. The following sections deal with the various aspects of this, including recruitment, the venue, questions, the function and constituency research participants, and the issues with the sampling frame.

### **Recruitment of Research Participants**

The first attempt to recruit participants involved attending a show and chatting to audience members informally about the show in order to gain their trust, and then asking whether they would be interested in contributing to a discussion about their experience of theatre. Despite reassurance from the Royal Court's Marketing Manager ('This is Liverpool. They'll all want to talk!'), this was unsuccessful. While people were indeed happy to chat, when asked whether they would take part in an interview or discussion group for research, they were clearly uncomfortable and they universally declined. A woman who had been chatting to me in the interval of a *Variety Lunch* felt unqualified because of where she was from: 'Oh no, I'm from sheltered accommodation'. When I responded that I could visit her in her accommodation and

talk with some of her friends too, she also declined ('No. We've come today. There's twenty four of us'). The option to have a chat at the Royal Court itself rather than at the sheltered accommodation was also rejected. Her and her friends hadn't minded chatting, but frankly they seemed a little threatened by the possibility of an interview.

On the second occasion, a professional rather than friendly approach was attempted. This time I attended the theatre more smartly dressed and with a clipboard and forms, in the hope that an air of authority may appeal more than a friendly approach. Again audience members were approached, and again they recoiled. One woman physically backed away from me towards the road, but suggested I talk to her friend, who was 'more of an expert'. He was standing nearby, and his expertise was explained by the woman by the fact he was a teacher. When it was explained that expertise wasn't necessary, just a chat about general impressions, nobody was reassured and for the second time, not a single participant was recruited. A final attempt was made at a later show where I went around tables inside the auditorium, but this was met with similar results, perhaps as I was disturbing people's social groups.

On reflection, it is perhaps not surprising that these theatregoers were happy to chat, but were unwilling to participate in events with more formal titles like 'interviews' or 'focus groups', or even prearranged 'chats'. While there may be a general reluctance to take part in such events (after all, who would want to? And people have many demands on their time), there was perhaps a particular issue for these audience members. Many clearly perceived, however wrongly, that they needed some kind of expertise to take part in discussions about the theatre, and that they were not qualified to contribute. Their social status as revealed by the Royal Court's study (2009) may have played a part; in their list of characteristics of those likely to volunteer for research, Rosnow & Rosenthal state that those who do volunteer for research 'tend to have higher social class status than nonvolunteers [sic]' (1976, p.99). Those with limited



links to higher education either first or second hand would have no experience of qualitative research, unlike their middle class counterparts, and phrases like 'focus group' may be unfamiliar; and they may be time poor (Bourdieu, 2010). Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood (2008) also discuss the suspicion such research might engender. Moreover, these were people out to have a good time, socialising at an event. A call to analyse that event, however softly made, is not necessarily appealing to many people; as Wacquant put it in the context of a boxing gym in Chicago, 'academic culture—is an alien planet so distant that its geography and the designs of its creatures are simply immaterial' (2005, p.449). (For more on the methodological implications of engaging working class people in research, see Skeggs et al., 2008).

### **Recruitment: The Choir**

Speaking to audience members about their perceptions seemed to be useful to the project. A solution to the problem of recruitment was to approach audience members in a different setting, and this was done through the Royal Court's Community Choir. The Community Choir was set up by the Royal Court Trust in March 2013. It is open to all abilities and is free to join. By later observation, members are predominantly female, and many are older and retired. In discussions, it emerged that some members attend because of a prior relationship with the Royal Court, Liverpool, as audience members. However, for most in the succeeding discussions, the attraction to the Choir was group singing rather than theatre, and several have attended theatre for the first time, or for the first time since school, due to the free tickets and invitations to dress rehearsals given by the Royal Court to Choir members. This was a benefit to this study as the sampling frame (the Choir) did not on the whole represent regular theatregoers, but included many people who were relatively new to theatre and, as it transpired, some who did not like theatre.

Focus groups were seen as a useful way not only to elicit rich data from a range of viewpoints (Sanders et al., 2011; Kreuger and Casey, 2014), but also to encourage people to participate. Being in a group is potentially less exposing, removing the focus on the individual, and these groups were familiar, members knowing each other at least by sight having shared activities. The more conversational style and the larger group also changes the power dynamic; in this case it perhaps removed the perception of a requirement of individual expertise. It does have some costs though, which are dealt with towards the end of this section.

Choir sessions are held weekly, and when the focus groups were held, they were housed in the basement of the Royal Court Theatre. Two choir rehearsals were attended in order to recruit focus group participants. In the break of the first, I made an announcement explaining the project and asking for volunteers. I followed this up by wandering around chatting to group members, and encouraging individuals where they seemed shy or reticent; names and contact details of those who were willing were taken on a form on a clipboard. The form and clipboard was left on a table for the duration of the choir rehearsal so people could add their names more discreetly if they preferred. The opportunity of one-to-one or 'you and your friend' interviews was offered as well as what were called 'group discussions' or focus groups. Two focus groups were held in all. For the second focus group, I also offered cake as an incentive/thank you; this caused its own problems which are discussed later on.

### **Venue for focus groups**

The venue used for both focus groups was the basement of the Royal Court where choir rehearsals were held, and each was held immediately after a choir practice to be convenient for participants. Permission to use the venue was sought in advance on both occasions, and kindly granted by theatre staff. This venue was deemed appropriate as all research participants felt

comfortable in the space; it was 'their' space that I was coming into as a guest. In addition, the theatre was closed (as it was a Monday) so no distractions were anticipated.

Two focus groups were held, on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> May 2014. In both cases, the project was again explained to participants, and an explanation given in writing. Participants were advised that the discussion would be recorded and transcribed, and were offered anonymity or the use of a pseudonym (all declined). Participants then signed a form to agree their participation (see *Appendix 3: Information sheet and consent form given to participants* for the information given and an example of a consent form).

## **Interviews**

Focus groups were followed by two individual interviews with audience members who had preferred a smaller discussion rather than attending a focus group. Three people were prepared to be interviewed alone or in smaller groups. These were Angela and her friend who wanted to be interviewed together, and Joyce. In the event, Angela's friend was ill so Angela was interviewed one-to-one, as was Joyce. In order to help interviewees to feel at home, on each occasion they were given the choice of venue. The first interview (with Angela) was held in Marks and Spencer's café. It was just before Christmas and the café was very busy which made audio difficult on occasion. The second interview was held in Joyce's home in north Liverpool at her invitation. Questions/areas for discussion were very similar.

## **Questions**

For both focus groups and interviews, a semi-structured approach was taken with a set of prepared questions to provide a basic structure and to ensure all areas were covered, but which were intended to be diverged from based on participants' contributions. The questions were based on categories drawn from both Bourdieu's work and themes arising from the

contemporary ethnographic research (e.g. ritual, discourse, dress), as well as from the field visits (topography, architecture, relationship with/between audience members, tropes). Prepared questions were open, and follow up questions were used to further explore or probe answers given (Saunders et al., 2011). A set of questions and the rationale for each is provided in *Appendix 4: Questions for ethnographic research*. A conversational style was used to gain the trust of focus group members in order to achieve a relaxed and comfortable environment (Saunders et al., 2011; Krueger and Casey, 2014) and so encourage a free-flowing conversation.

### **Process for and issues with focus groups**

The first focus group, which was made up of four participants, worked very successfully. The discussion lasted for forty-five minutes, with the conversation flowing naturally prompted by my questions, and the discussion coming to a natural end with all participants having contributed. Participants were very disciplined and good at taking turns.

The second focus group was more chaotic for several reasons. Firstly, it became clear on the night that on this occasion the space was available for a limited amount of time (the Community and Education Manager who would lock up afterwards needed to go and write a funding bid). Secondly, the discussion was interrupted several times by staff members either making sure the group was OK or offering tea. The cake I had brought as an incentive/thank you was a distraction; at times, it became the focus, and there was an urgency to get it distributed and eaten once the group knew time was limited. The group was slightly larger (six participants rather than four for the first focus group) and made up of older people than before. Perhaps for those reasons this group was slightly less disciplined, with participants talking across each other but also not always sure of what was happening. There is perhaps a classed dimension to this, with the first group made up of more middle class participants able to mobilise their understanding of how a group discussion should take place (see Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood,

2008, on how class can affect the form of response as well as its content). In retrospect, the first group may have benefited from the inclusion of two teachers and a student who had an effect on the culture; its culture was very much one of taking turns to speak and allowing space for others. The second group did not have this constraint and was perhaps made up of participants who were less used to participating in formal group discussions. It was therefore a much more difficult group to manage. Even so, the discussion in the second focus group was productive and lasted forty-two minutes, and good, rich discussions were had on both occasions and all participants contributed.

## **Recording**

Focus groups and interviews were recorded using smartphone applications (*Audio Memos* for the first focus group and both *Audio Memos* and *Rev Voice Recorder* for the second focus group) which were set to automatically upload to cloud storage (*Dropbox*). This obviated the need to make notes during discussion to allow for a more free-flowing, 'natural' conversation. For the second focus group a second recording device (an iPad) was also used as backup. This had the added advantage of siting recording devices in two places, which was beneficial given the larger group, and later aided comprehension of playback. I was concerned the iPad would be more obtrusive, but it seemed to have been forgotten once the discussion had started.

## **Function and constituency of ethnographic research participants**

The function of research participants for the ethnographic research was to give a better understanding of what was happening at the Royal Court Theatre and in the field of Liverpool theatregoing, rather than themselves to be representative of a particular class. This is consistent with the aims of this study, which are to understand the subjective, lived experience of theatregoing at the Royal Court and to understand how the Royal Court fits into the wider field

of Liverpool theatre. Consequently, demographic information that may have been used to categorise individual class origin in a functional manner was not intentionally collected. Some demographic information was of course revealed as part of focus group and interview discussions. It emerged that participants in the ethnographic research included a hairdresser, two teachers and a museum education officer; ages ranged from late teenage to a participant in her eighties; several left school at fifteen or sixteen and one at fourteen, with two completing tertiary education; several grew up in the poorer parts of north Liverpool and one in Kirkby, while at least two grew up in the Wirral (parts of which are more affluent). All participants were women (this was the majority constituency of the Choir). A list of research participants with a short description of each is given in *Appendix 5: Research participants*.

### **Issues with the Choir as a sampling frame**

The sampling frame for participants in the ethnographic research was members of the Royal Court Community Choir. A potential issue with this sampling frame was the particular relationship that members of the Royal Court Community Choir may have had to the Royal Court, Liverpool through their Choir membership. The Choir is housed in the theatre's building, and members are often offered free tickets to shows and invitations to dress rehearsals. There was then the possibility that experiences reported by focus group members and by interviewees were particular to Choir members rather than experienced by general audience members. As a specific example, Choir members' discussions of feeling 'at home', and their sense of having a particular, familiar relationship with both actors and front of house staff at the Theatre, may have come from the special status they felt or were accorded as Choir members. While this study is not intended to be representative, it was still useful to compare the findings could be checked against other research methods, such as the field visits and thick descriptions, and the

analysis of TripAdvisor (see below). In fact though, they demonstrated a similarity of perceived experience.

### **‘Expert’ interview**

In addition to the ethnographic focus groups and interviews, an ‘expert’ interview was undertaken to fill some of the gaps in knowledge and recorded history about the Royal Court in its less documented period from 1979 to 2005 when it was a music venue. From 1983-1988, Simon Bell worked at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, as a Venue Assistant. The interview with Simon took place in an informal meeting space at Leeds Beckett University. It was recorded as for other interviews and Simon was given similar information and signed a consent form. Questions for Simon were open and based around discovering his impressions and memory of the theatre, the building, and its audiences.

### **Methods of analysis**

In each case, recordings were transcribed with the aid of transcription software in the *NVivo 10* qualitative research platform, which made for easier rewinds as well as allowing slowed playback. The data was then analysed using the categories drawn from both Bourdieu’s work and the contemporary ethnographic research, as well as new categories drawn from close reading of the material (Jola, Ehrenberg, and Reynolds, 2012). Initial categories included cost (price of attendance), first introduction to theatre and memory, and rituals around theatregoing. These initial themes didn’t so much change as become richer and were supplemented with themes that emerged. A theme that was added for instance was the familial relationship with ad hoc performance, as this finding had not been anticipated. Themes were developed and discussed as findings in the relevant chapters. A list of themes used is available in *Appendix 6: Themes used in analysing ethnographic data*.

## **TripAdvisor**

The potential issue around the sample of research participants and what may be a particular relationship with the Royal Court are outlined above. Consequently, it was felt that it would be useful to find ways to discover whether the feelings of participants were also shared by other Royal Court audience members. As audience members had proved difficult to recruit for live discussion, an online population was sought. TripAdvisor was seen as a useful online forum from which to 'scrape' existing data.

TripAdvisor is a Web 2.0 site publishing content about holidays and travel, alongside links to booking tools. It was an early adopter of user-generating content, and hosts the opinions and ratings of consumers on a range of holiday destinations and attractions. These 'attractions' include theatres and entertainment venues such as the Royal Court, Liverpool. Users comment on a recent visit, upload photographs, and rate the attraction. The subsequent data in the form of reviews and images is readily available to all accessing the site.

Using TripAdvisor had several advantages. The first is an advantage for much User Generated Content, that is that the data is already collected and is accessible to the researcher. The fact that it is user-generated and is without the bias of a researcher or corporate moderator also has particular benefits. Branthwaite and Patterson (2011) point out that some of the advantages of such data are similar to that of other qualitative data collection, in that it 'gathers spontaneous views and opinions' and gives 'freedom for respondents to set the agenda and produce spontaneous ideas' (p.435). In the case of TripAdvisor, theatregoers had volunteered their opinions freely without being steered or guided. When posting on the site, users are asked to rate the attraction on a Likert scale out of five stars, and say whether they would attend the attraction again. Beyond this, free text is used and contributors can comment freely and spontaneously on any aspect of their experience depending on that experience, their own



priorities and preferences, and what they assume may be the preferences of other site users. Templates are not used to frame comments, and questions are not asked. This leads to a greater level of neutrality, with a range of aspects of the venue/event being discussed based on the interests, observations and experiences of the theatregoer and their impression of what would interest their peers, rather than being framed or constrained by the interests and preconceptions of the researcher or the corporate moderator.

Users also relate their reflections in their own vernacular, to an audience that may be imagined to be much like themselves. Consequently, whether reviews are positive or negative, the language tends to be open and helpful, intending to encourage, guide, or warn others. Finally, in contrast to Twitter and its 140 character limit, and Facebook where 'reviews' tend to be limited to one or two sentences, TripAdvisor reviews tend to use a paragraph or more to make their point, and so can comment in depth on an issue or can take in a broad sweep of issues. All of this results in rich data which may in some ways tell us much more about the experience than had people been asked in an interview. Finally, there are few ethical issues with the use of this data as contributors have volunteered their reviews and placed them in a public arena, and use of pseudonyms means individuals cannot be easily identified.

However, there are some disadvantages. In common with all organic data, the population of users is necessarily skewed towards those with internet access and who are, to some extent, computer and Web 2.0 literate, and users of the site cannot be said to be 'representative' of the wider population (Branthwaite and Patterson, 2011). This is not an issue for this qualitative study which is not intended to be generalised. More significantly, as contributors are anonymous, follow up to explore issues on a deeper level is not possible.

Despite these issues, the ability of the theatregoer to at least partially reflect their own experience in their own words and without the imposed agenda of the researcher or a corporate

site moderator, and the consequent richness of the data, made TripAdvisor a valuable and fertile source. Using this 'organic data' to supplement the 'designed data' (Groves, 2011, p.869) collected from field visits, thick descriptions, interviews, and focus groups further strengthened it, as data enriched the data already collected through the designed research methods outlined above.

### **TripAdvisor data analysis**

The 2013-14 season of plays at the Royal Court, Liverpool, was selected as a sampling frame for the TripAdvisor analysis as it was the same season as the field visits that had already been undertaken for this study. This meant that I had the advantage of familiarity with all of the shows reviewed, as well as with the venue and its operation over that period. The TripAdvisor site is dynamic and is constantly updated with new reviews. Consequently, all reviews of events from the 2013-14 season (n = 66) were isolated and archived for analysis. Sixty-four of the reviews were of evening shows, one was of a Variety Lunch and the remaining review was of a heritage tour of the theatre building.

Once isolated, the reviews themselves were read to discover themes drawing on the theoretical literature – e.g. the importance of humour/comedy to working class theatregoers according to both Bourdieu (2010, p.26) and McGrath (1989, p.54) – those in the empirical literature (e.g. the importance of other audience members according to both the Creative Research (2007) and Scollen (2008) studies), and the empirical research such as field visits, thick descriptions, focus groups and interviews (e.g. the importance of 'Scouseness' and the friendliness of staff according to some interviewees and focus group members). New themes emerged and were added as the data was reread and further analysed (such as nostalgia). Themes were then grouped into hierarchies of theme and sub-theme, leading to four final themes: show and

content; venue; comfort zone; and discourse. These themes are listed in *Appendix 2*:

*TripAdvisor*.

Alongside themes, keyword searches were also utilised to further explore aspects of the data, for instance around value for money and the good night out, and to explore the discourse around the Royal Court, Liverpool and its events. The subsequent findings were integrated into the thematic chapters (Chapters 4-6) alongside the designed data.

## **Conclusion**

Multiple methods have been used to gain a rich picture of what was happening on stage, in the audience, and in the perception of audience members at the Royal Court, Liverpool. These methods have included field visits leading to thick descriptions, photographic methods, focus groups, interviews, and analysis of user generated content. In discussing *habitus*, Bourdieu claimed that ‘Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in *habitus*, outside and inside agents’ (in Grenfell, 1996, p.290). This multi-method approach has allowed me not only to observe, record and analyse ‘the things’ that may make participants feel at home, but also to question the social reality of what is happening ‘in minds’, through focus groups and interviews, in order to understand what it is about the Royal Court, Liverpool, that makes theatregoers feel at home. The following chapters present and analyse the data produced by this breadth of research, and examine different facets of the social reality of the theatre. This begins with a history that contextualises the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, in its socio-cultural field in order to understand its place in the imaginary of working class Liverpool.

## Chapter 3. The Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool: A contextual history

### **Introduction**

To understand the contemporary Royal Court, Liverpool, and its place in the imaginary of working class theatregoing in the city, it is useful to understand the Royal Court's history. The Royal Court has been a place of entertainment for nearly 200 years, and throughout that time has welcomed audiences of different social classes in different ways. The history recounted here demonstrates the Royal Court's trajectory through those years as it has struggled to find and maintain a place within the often crowded and always dynamic field of Liverpool theatre. It shows how an agent, in this case a theatre, is forced to change – sometimes to adapt, sometimes to move to a different position in the field, and sometimes to attempt to subvert that field – in reaction to the behaviours and actions, entrances and exits, of other agents within the field. It also shows how agents are affected by overlapping, adjacent, homologous and wider fields. In the case of the Royal Court Liverpool, these fields include (but are not limited to) the

fields of Liverpool civic life, of Liverpool theatre, of British theatregoing and theatre production, of British cultural practice, and of business, trade and entrepreneurship. All of these fields of course sit within the wider social field in which all fields are contained. Each of these fields are themselves dynamic, as they change and adapt to social, political, economic and technological forces, and this is also illustrated in this chapter. Finally, the chapter contextualises some of the stakes in the field, laying the foundation for the issues which are examined in more detail in the following chapter.

Presented here is an outline of the full history of the Theatre within the field of Liverpool theatre. It is viewed chronologically, split into different periods reflecting the particular sorts of entertainment presented within that period. This is not to say that these periods are homogenous or always distinct, rather that this is a broad characterisation of the theatre during each period, showing paradigm shifts due to changes in the field. The first period is discussed in particular detail. This runs from the founding of the theatre in 1825 until 1881 during which time it was first a site of circus and spectacle, and then drama and melodrama, reflecting changes in the meaning of, and taste for, theatre in British culture and society. This is of particular interest as, despite obvious great differences, there are parallels with the Royal Court Theatre today. The Amphitheatre (as it was called) of the early nineteenth century was a meeting place as well as a theatre, a place of shared revelry, collective participation, and reassuring nostalgia. Moreover, it was an accessible attraction to ordinary working class people. Its entertainments and plays were not aimed at elevation of the mind but had commercial imperatives, not least the fight to keep the theatre open in an uncertain and not always profitable theatrical world and against a changing economic, social and political backdrop. In addition, the Amphitheatre was marginalised in its field, side-lined by the more established Theatre Royal with its consecration by royalty through its royal patent, and later by the popularity of the new music hall; there are parallels with the Royal Court today, marginalised by the large scale popular theatres on one

hand and the more valorised theatres consecrated by Arts Council funding on the other. It is also interesting as the contemporary Royal Court has (perhaps unconsciously) adopted some of the tropes of its past, and the sense of the Royal Court's past is important to some of its audience members today. This is discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

A second period of particular interest is that from 1979 to 2005, when the Royal Court becomes an altogether different place, dropping out of the field of Liverpool theatres and theatregoing and becoming a 'destination venue' for music gigs featuring artists from a range of rock and pop genres. What's on stage during this period is discussed in less detail as it reveals less about theatre and theatregoing. However it has importance as it forms part of the contemporary memory and myth of the Royal Court, the lived experience of this time featuring in the nostalgia and even love that some current audience members express for the theatre. Unpicking the reasons for this affection reveals tropes that feed into the idea of audience members feeling 'at home' in the current iteration of the Royal Court.

The intervening years are useful to examine too, not just in connecting the dots, but in revealing the forces that act on the Royal Court as it enters the field, as newcomers (new theatres and places of entertainment) with differing amounts of capital(s) also enter the field, and as changes in the external environment are refracted through the field. The Royal Court and the other theatres in Liverpool can be seen vying for position by adopting strategies of distinction, including subversion, in what Appleton (2015) rightly suggests is a very crowded field. This notion of field is expanded on in Chapter 4.

A focus of the history in this chapter is the audience. In *Making Up the Audience: Spectatorship in Historical Context* (2012), Susan Bennett discusses the difficulties of researching historical audiences' experience of theatre. Until the advent of blogging, there were few repositories for audience opinion or other audience record. While there is comparatively little in the way of

contemporary or historical record of the Royal Court's audience, inferences have been made based on the available evidence, which, as might be expected, is much more about repertoire, changes of ownership, and successive building works than the people who, it could be argued, kept the theatre open. However, repertoire, ownership, and the building and its place in the city are intimately bound up with audiences as they all signify what Bennett calls the 'horizon of expectation' around a theatre (2012, p.9) that tells an audience what role to take.

A note about nomenclature would be helpful in tracing the Royal Court's history. What is now the Royal Court Theatre has had various names throughout its existence, reflecting its position in the field and consequent attempts at what would now be called repositioning or rebranding. In the short space between 1825 and 1840, names included the Royal Amphitheatre (Kaye, 1833, p.182), Cooke's New Circus (Lloyd, 2015b), Cooke's Royal Amphitheatre (Broadbent, 1908), Cooke's Royal Amphitheatre of Arts (according to a plaque in the Royal Court foyer), Cooke's Amphitheatre of Arts, Ducrow's Royal Amphitheatre, Ducrow's Royal Amphitheatre of Arts (Ackroyd, 1996, p.22), the American Circus and later just the Royal Amphitheatre; it was often referred to as 'The Amphi' (Ackroyd, 1996, p.22). These names often reflect changes of ownership or lessee, although it is difficult to know whether they are formal name changes, local or popular names, or names used by chroniclers and historians to distinguish between periods. For clarity, the theatre is referred to from its inception as the Amphitheatre, until it becomes the Royal Court Theatre in 1881.

A second note is useful in explaining how the historical field has been limited for the purposes of this chapter. The period from the Royal Court's inception as the Amphitheatre to its current management encompasses at least eighteen distinct city centre theatres; between 1850 and 1900, at least eight of these were in operation at any one time. For clarity, this chapter focuses on the theatres that were most present in the field for the Amphitheatre, and those that are

present today. These are the now defunct Theatre Royal, the Star Theatre (presently the Playhouse), the Prince of Wales (now the Empire), and latecomer the Everyman Theatre. These theatres and their various names can be seen in the Timeline in *Appendix 6*, that includes all city centre theatres. A truncated version is given in Figure 1.

Historic name	Present name	1820	1840	1860	1880	1900	1920	1960	Present
Theatre Royal		<<1772		1885					
Liver Theatre		1825	1850						
Amphitheatre	Royal Court	1826 Cooke's New Circus		Royal Court Theatre					
Star Concert Hall	Playhouse		1847	New Star Music Hall					
Prince of Wales	Empire			1861 Prince of Wales Theatre & Opera House					
	Everyman							1964	Everyman Theatre

Figure 1: Timeline of Liverpool city centre theatres

This figure includes only those theatres that are discussed in this chapter. Note that 'historic name' is not always the theatre's original name as these are sometimes short-lived, but the name that is used to refer to that theatre here. A fuller timeline including original names is given in Appendix 6.

Sources drawn on in this chapter are eclectic, including academic literature, local newspapers, government records, archives, and blogs. In addition, the section on the theatre's years as a music venue is partly informed by an interview with a former employee of the theatre, Simon Bell, who was useful not only in corroborating existing information but also in getting a 'feel' for the venue at this time. However the main sources for the theatre's history come from R.J. Broadbent's encyclopaedic, fascinating and often funny *Annals of the Liverpool Stage: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, Together with Some Account of the Theatres and Music Halls in Bootle and Birkenhead* (1908), and Harold Ackroyd's invaluable and comprehensive *The Liverpool Stage* (1996).



## **1825-1840: 'Hippodrama', circus and spectacle**

The site of the current Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, has been a place of entertainment for nearly 200 years, and was born of competition and enterprise. The first stone of the original building was laid in 1825 (Taylor, 1837, p.164; Picton, 1875, p.193) by John Cooke, a circus entrepreneur, who had argued with the management of Liverpool's Olympic Circus, and planned the new venture in direct opposition to that going concern. It opened a year later as Cooke's New Circus, but was very quickly known as the Royal Amphitheatre, a venue of mass entertainment. There is no evidence that the Royal Amphitheatre had any legal right to style itself 'Royal', but this was a useful way to market itself and to lend the new venture an air of legitimacy and respectability.

According to contemporary accounts, the theatre itself was 'a spacious building of brick, with a stuccoed front...The interior [was] remarkably well arranged, and beautifully decorated. It is allotted to equestrian and pantomimic performances, and is generally open during the winter and spring months' (Taylor, 1837 p.164). Local historian Steven Horton (2014) relates:

With regard to spectator comfort, the theatre was reported to be more spacious than the nearby Theatre Royal in Williamson Square. Even though it was only partially built the [local newspaper] Mercury predicted it would become one of the most elegant theatres in the Kingdom.

The comparison with the Theatre Royal is significant; this was the Amphitheatre's nearest rival geographically, being sited just a few hundred yards away in nearby Williamson Square, but also a rival in the field. It is worth looking at this rival in more detail, as it continues to play a part in the field of Liverpool theatre for much of the Amphitheatre's existence, and also tells us a lot about theatregoing, class and taste in this period.

Liverpool's Theatre Royal not only had the advantage over the Amphitheatre of being opulent, and of being already established and thus known throughout the city and beyond, but, as one of several theatres royal that existed throughout the country, it held a royal patent. Until the late 1760s, there were only two patent theatres in the country, both in London, the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. These theatres had been awarded patents by King Charles II following the Restoration, and were the only theatres in the kingdom allowed to present 'the legitimate drama' (Davis, 2007, p.25; Moody 2007, p.25). Other theatres were allowed to show only comedy, pantomime and melodrama, or drama with music; thus patents were state-sanctioned markers of taste. Following a successful petition for a third patent in the capital in 1766, the provinces requested the same (Moody, 2007, p.24), and from 1767 provincial towns and cities could petition the King for a patent (Davis, 2007). Such petitions were often class-based, emphasising 'urban citizenship and polite sociability' (Moody, 2007, p.24) as in Glasgow's successful petition of 1803, which emphasised the growth in 'the number of wealthy and opulent inhabitants' of the city including 'nobility and gentry' (Strang, 1857), presumably arguing that this made Glasgow deserving of such an honour, or sufficiently sophisticated to contend with 'serious drama'. Liverpool's application for a playhouse was no different; it was made on the basis of its new theatre having already been built 'in the most commodious Manner', and that it would be 'a great Advantage to the Town; as well as very agreeable and convenient to great Numbers of People of Fortune and Distinction' (HC, 1770). The Bill was approved by the House of Lords on third reading in 1771 (HL, 1771). Such an early application for a playhouse suggests the increasing confidence of Liverpool as a growing town, and its swift approval suggests this confidence was mutual.

Patents granted the theatres royal an oligopoly in large cities like London (Davis, 2007), but a virtual monopoly in towns like Liverpool. Moreover, theatres royal were identified with the upper class. In contrast to the popular legitimacy of the minor theatres such as the

Amphitheatre, according to Davis the 'patent theatres' [had a] despotic allegiance with the aristocracy at the expense of the people's perceived customary rights' (2007, p.35). The 'Half Price' (or 'Old Price') riots in 1809 were prompted by a ticket price rise in Covent Garden's Theatre Royal that effectively excluded working class people (Butsch, 2010). These riots had been repeated in the following year at Liverpool's Theatre Royal (Picton 1875; Broadbent, 1908, p.122), and had perhaps been a demonstration of class consciousness around the theatre as a site of symbolic violence, or as Hays puts it: 'the popular audience's ability to self-consciously assert its right to determine its place in the cultural domain of the theatre' (1995, p.69).

In terms of repertoire, the Amphitheatre's older rival, the Theatre Royal, was primarily a playhouse showing dramas. It was much closer to what Bourdieu would later term '*bourgeois*' theatre in its presentation of established plays by Sheridan and Shakespeare, more recent comedies of manners such as royal favourite *The Belle's Stratagem*, and Italian opera. It also attracted the theatrical stars of the day, often the metropolitan actors from the Theatre Royal in London's Drury Lane, such as Siddons, Kemble and Kean, who played at the Liverpool Theatre Royal when released from the London season. According to Davis, the theatres royal 'emphasized a rhetoric of scarcity; with the patentees making claims to the unique status of irreproducible art (especially with regard to performing talent)' (2007, p.21). However, alongside the 'legitimate', Liverpool's Theatre Royal also played to the crowd, presenting occasional animal acts, including the then popular hippodramas. Kwint describes 'hippodrama' as a mixture of 'swashbuckling melodramas on horseback' (2002, p.95), later taken to its 'romantic heights' by the great circus performer and entrepreneur Andrew Ducrow. Popular circus luminaries the Astleys were presented at the Theatre Royal for successive seasons, visiting the provinces from their own eponymous Royal Amphitheatre in London.

There is little direct evidence about the classes of audiences in Liverpool at that time. However, Booth (1991) suggests that the separation of classes between the theatres royal and the minor theatres was more true in London than in the provinces, where fewer theatres meant classes were forced to mix. In fact, evidence given to the Select Committee held on patent theatres in 1832 suggests a range of classes attended the same theatres, both patent and minor, inside and outside the capital. Davidge, sometime lessee of the Liverpool Royal Amphitheatre who also ran London's Coburg Theatre (both minor theatres), said his audiences in London included the royal family and the nobility; this was supported by Forbes, part-owner of the patented Covent Garden Theatre (Hansard, 1832). Davidge's further evidence was that social classes were not separated by taste for a particular venue, type of entertainment, or even price bracket, but rather by days of the week. According to Davidge, the 'working classes' tended to attend his theatres on Monday and the 'better classes, the play-going public generally' attended in the middle of the week (1270-1273). Booth (1991), in his exploration of Victorian theatre, supports this notion of a working class preference for Mondays. This could be due to a range of factors including working patterns, pay days, or, perhaps more likely, discounted tickets or access to free seats to encourage attendance on an otherwise unpopular and thus uneconomic day of the week.

According to Appleton (2015, p.28), Liverpool's Theatre Royal enjoyed a mixed audience including 'wealthy merchants, lawyers and brokers' in the more expensive seats, and, most probably, 'labourers, sailors and trades men and women in the cheaper seats in the gallery' – not to mention 'cyprians' (Broadbent, 1908, p.101) and 'the frail fair' (Broadbent, 1908, p.136), or prostitutes. Seating areas in the Theatre Royal were the boxes, upper boxes, pit and gallery (Ackroyd, 1996, p.18), and prices ranged from four shillings and sixpence down to one shilling and sixpence. This hierarchical segregation of classes by price and seating was in common with other theatres royal which, according to Davis (1993, p.21), employed price variegation to

strengthen appeal to all classes. However, as well as difference, it also indicates shared cultural tastes; theatre in its many forms was an enjoyment that was shared across what would now be called social groups, as Stedman Jones indicates: '[a]ll classes shared in the passions for gambling, theatre, tea gardens, pugilism and animal sports' (1983, p.185). The evidence from the Select Committee discussed above suggests that while there was class differentiation within theatres and perhaps by days of the week, the taste for theatre itself was not bracketed off by class.

The patented Theatre Royal had been remodelled (and rebranded as 'the New Theatre Royal') eight years before the opening of the Amphitheatre to make it, in the opinion of its management, 'worthy [of] the Opulence and Spirit of the second Town of England' (New Theatre Royal's playbill, reproduced in Broadbent, 1908, p.110). Theatre was important in Liverpool's outward facing status but also its sense of self as a growing economic and political force and a cultured putative city. The Theatre Royal was, according to the *Monthly Mirror*, 'at once the most elegant, commodious, compact, and chastely proportioned building for the purpose of theatrical exhibition in the United Kingdom' (Broadbent, 1908, p.110). It had been further updated in 1822 (Broadbent, 1908, p.141) and had put its prices up to defray the cost (Ackroyd, 1996, p.18). Presumably, in the Amphitheatre's opening years, the Theatre Royal was still recouping on its considerable investment, and would be sensitive to the entrance of a neighbouring rival.

The entrance of the Amphitheatre into the field, with its spectacular shows, its equestrian manager, and its attraction through spectacle and circus to an even wider range of classes and price brackets, would certainly have been a threat to the Theatre Royal. The Amphitheatre had set its sights firmly at the highest point of the dominant fraction of the field; while it still had segregated areas and variegated pricing, it was there to sell as many tickets as it could to as

many people as it could regardless of class. It was larger than the Theatre Royal (Broadbent, 1908), and cheaper, 'with admission prices ranging from one shilling in the lower circle to three shillings and sixpence in the dress boxes' (Horton, 2014; Broadbent, 1908, p.221). The Amphitheatre had boxes, a pit and a gallery, and backless seats at the cheaper end. Its repertoire of circus would help its universal appeal.

In his study of contemporary circus entrepreneurs Philip and John Astley, Marius Kwint (2002) describes circus-going in this period as 'surprisingly uncontroversial' (p.99) and enjoyed by all classes. The hybridity of circus, an entertainment that fitted into a space between theatre and fairground, also meant it escaped some of the legislation that restricted the patented and established theatres of the time. The flavour of early nineteenth-century circus was 'hippodrama', dominated by the Astleys and Andrew Ducrow. Ducrow achieved 'both critical and popular acclaim for his graceful mimes in the ring, and for...stage extravaganzas' (Kwint, 2002, p.95). He was a fixture at Astley's and toured the provinces to great acclaim, and much sought after.

Despite its lofty position and monopoly on drama, the New Theatre Royal in nearby Williamson Square may have sensed competition from an economic perspective, especially as, according to Davis (2007), so-called 'minor' theatres tended to undercut the rival patent theatres. The year the Amphitheatre entered the field as Cooke's New Circus, the New Theatre Royal presented a circus spectacle, starring the iconic 'Ducrow and his famous stud of horses' (Broadbent, 1908, p.144), presumably demonstrating its own mastery in the field of circus to the more specialist newcomer and attempting to undermine its position even before it could establish itself in the field. For its part, the Royal Amphitheatre presented a drama, *Rob Roy*, without having a licence; according to Broadbent (1908), Cooke was subsequently prosecuted by the lessees of the Theatre Royal, although he does not record the outcome. This rivalry was to continue, with each

theatre stealing the other's natural repertoire, and with the Theatre Royal seeking to block dramas planned by the Amphitheatre with recourse to the law.

Despite this attempt to undermine it, the Royal Amphitheatre entered the field with a fanfare. Horton (2014) gives the following account of its first show, which gives a flavour of the extravaganza presented:

The opening night began with an address by stage manager Mr McGibbon, then the whole audience sang *God Save the King*. There was then a performance of the ballet *La Fille mal Gardée – The Wayward Daughter*, followed by Mr Cooke himself mounting one of two Arabian Mares for a dancing horses display. He then took to another horse, *Spotted Charger* for a solo display on what was billed as the most sagacious horse in Europe. There were then demonstrations of tightrope walking, clown acts and the grand finale was another equestrian spectacle, *Timour the Tartar*, involving over thirty performers. The audience reaction was extremely favourable, with them rising to their feet and cheering on many occasions throughout the evening.

The first show then was a grand spectacular, starting with *La Fille mal Gardée*, a popular pastiche and often bawdy ballet, and finishing with *Timour*, subtitled by its author, popular gothic horror writer Matthew Lewis, as a 'Grand Romantic Melo Drama in two acts' (1830). According to Viveash, a scholar of Jane Austen, *Timour* had been written fifteen years earlier as 'a spectacular piece for the theatre, whatever it might be, as long as horses could again appear' (1999, p.92). He goes on to say that '[i]n 1811, *The Times* had praised the play, saying that it was one display of splendor [sic] and equitation from beginning to end, with the caveat that the story was the worst the critic had ever sat through'. In other words, it was a crowd pleaser, entirely about spectacle and exploiting the fashion for 'hippodrama', and traded on Lewis's celebrity and more locally Cooke's specialism as an equestrian and master of circus. *Timour* had

been shown at London's patent Theatre Royal in Covent Garden in the 1810s and had caused some uproar, with claims that the patent theatres had 'abandoned the legitimate repertoire' (Moody, 2007, p.25). The dilution of legitimacy represented by showing such spectacle was to pave the way for the end of patent theatres.

This opening night at the Amphitheatre really was a distillation of the repertoire to come. The forthcoming programming was a mixture of spectacle and melodrama with the occasional play making an incursion into the territory of the Theatre Royal. Horton (2014) describes Mr Goore, the scenery painter, selling tickets for the Amphitheatre 'from his hat-manufacturing premises in Williamson Square', just on the Theatre Royal's doorstep.

In late 1828 following Cooke's retirement (and bankruptcy, according to the National Archives, 2015a), the Amphitheatre was taken on by famed equestrian performer and entrepreneur Andrew Ducrow who had performed the year before at the New Theatre Royal, which will have been a coup for the Amphitheatre and a blow to its rival. According to Broadbent, Ducrow 'had the theatre again in 1829 and 1830' (1908, p.222); Saxon describes a series of three-month leases annually from Boxing Night, as Ducrow spread his popular performances between Astley's in London and the provinces (1978). The Amphitheatre continued to show a variety of work throughout the late 1820s to include spectacles and animal shows, especially equestrian acts, but also 'a programme of opera, music, theatre and ballet' (Broadbent, 1908, pp.223-4). This departure into more conventional theatre may have been a further challenge for the nearby Theatre Royal, who decided to play the Amphitheatre at its own game. In late 1829, Ducrow had planned an elephant spectacle for the Amphitheatre, but according to his stage machinist:

[t]he managers of the Theatre Royal there, Messrs. Lewis and Banks, were aware of our intention, and had made up their minds to hurt our business, if possible.

Accordingly, when I arrived in Liverpool, I found the dead walls of the city covered with



posters announcing the forthcoming appearance of a then fashionable 'star', no other than the celebrated trained elephant of Siam, *Mdlle. Dejeek* (in Broadbent, 1908, pp.222-224).

In a counter attack, Ducrow hired a whole menagerie at short notice to upstage it, announcing for Boxing Night '*the Grand Eastern Spectacle, entitled The Elephant of Siam*'. According to one of the theatre workers, this was such a success it ran for a month before touring the 'three kingdoms', and causing the Theatre Royal's elephant show to flop. While Broadbent (1908) casts some doubt on the timing and possibly the veracity of this anecdote, it nonetheless illustrates the constant positioning and repositioning in the field on the part of both the Theatre Royal and the Royal Amphitheatre.

A story recounted by Ducrow's biographer, A.H. Saxon, underlines this ongoing struggle in the field (1978, pp.244-247). Saxon recounts the protracted public argument between Ducrow and a Liverpool critic, and the subsequent withdrawal of the editor's complimentary admission card to the Amphitheatre (1978, p.245), because:

the advertisement sent for insertion in your paper has been made a secondary consideration to an establishment of inferior pretensions, instead of occupying the situation he [Ducrow] conceives it ought to do, namely, immediately after the Theatre Royal, or in place of it (p.247).

The 'establishment of inferior pretensions' is unnamed (presumably the Liver, the Sans Pareil or the Christian Street Circus), 'but Ducrow was said to have seen this as an 'apparent intention to degrade' the Amphitheatre, and a snub.

In 1830, the Amphitheatre was under new management and was refurbished to include a proscenium, perhaps presaging more drama but at least at first used for the popular *tableaux vivant* ('actors formed themselves into a picturesque grouping and held it for a

while...constituting a painterly composition', according to Brandt, 1993, quoted in Keuris, 2012, p.6). However, the fascination with large animals, and especially elephants, continued:

The *Rajah's Daughter* was a popular play and performed again in 1830, when there were six horses and a real waterfall as part of the act. At the end of that run which lasted a week, there was a one day break and the theatre was open again for the *Elephant of Siam*, with all the scenery having been repainted. By now the remodelling was complete and the venue was re-branded the Royal Amphitheatre. Charitable events continued though, with a performance of *Luke the Labourer* [A domestic melodrama in two acts] in June 1831 in aid of the homeless (Horton, 2014).

The *Elephant of Siam* had been premiered the previous year at London's Adelphi Theatre and featured 'an under plot of high farce to accompany the upper plot of high tragedy' according to The Spectator (1829); it was clearly a work of spectacle with little to recommend either plot or writing, but the real live elephant was well worth seeing and, at London's Adelphi, '[t]he house was crammed to the ceiling', and obviously promised success in Liverpool too.

Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer* is a significant piece of programming. It was, according to its author, a domestic melodrama in two acts. Scholar of Victorian theatre Lynn Voskuil (2002) claims that 'early stage melodrama... [of this time] frequently appealed openly to the working classes. Plays... [for instance] depicted scenes of eviction and foreclosure that spoke directly to the situations of many working-class playgoers' (p.246). Reid's analysis of *Luke the Labourer* confirms that it was of this type. It:

...tells the story of Luke, an embittered rural labourer dismissed by his employer for persistent drunkenness. His reputation in ruins, Luke is unable to find work and subsequently his wife dies of starvation. Buckstone combines nostalgic elements, like the opening scene of harvest home, with more biting criticism of the extreme

economic vulnerability of the rural poor, not just by focusing on Luke's economic vulnerability but also the vulnerability of his original employer, the tenant Farmer Wakefield, whose economic situation is so precarious that he is facing eviction at the play's opening. This focus on powerlessness among the working poor would undoubtedly have had resonances for metropolitan audiences (2011, p.100).

Reid suggests that by drawing on and resuscitating ideas of tradition, 'melodramatists were able to gain much-needed perspective on the predicament of modernity'. While nostalgia could be regressive, it 'also provided the route to valuable resources of social solidarity and meaning, as well as a sense of belonging and place' (2011, p.101) that was particularly useful in a changing society with displaced populations such as the rural poor. This has resonances with the appeal of some of today's Royal Court shows, as discussed in Chapter 6. While the character of the unemployed Luke appears feckless and unsympathetic, according to Reid the play challenges the dominant idea that the poor are to blame for their own predicament. Further, a 'number of lower-class characters [take] centre stage and effectively becoming the protagonists in their own stories' (Reid, 2011, p.115). Reid concludes that '[i]n the context of emergent class-consciousness Luke's speech [early in the play] can be read as part of a wider discourse about contested attitudes towards the poor in the early decades of the nineteenth century'. In this way, *Luke* can be seen 'as a site of resistance as well as a source of comfort for lower class audiences' (Reid, 2011, p.116). The Amphitheatre's commitment to melodrama as one strand of its programming throughout this period is then also a commitment to particular audiences from a particular class, the so called 'lower' classes, in telling their story and representing them on stage, and in its use of nostalgia. To some extent, there are similarities with today's Royal Court repertoire, as is discussed in Chapter 6.

Throughout the 1830s, programming strands remained diverse, and included lectures, debates and classical music. In the early 1830s, virtuoso violinist Paganini is said to have appeared at the Royal Amphitheatre on three occasions (Broadbent, 1908, p.255). In his memoirs of Liverpool, Stonehouse (1863, p.233) suggests that on the first occasion Paganini did not trust the management and asked for his fees upfront, confusing the Amphitheatre with the much less salubrious Sans Pareil theatre at the other end of Great Charlotte Street. While this anecdote cannot be verified, it suggests the relative positions of venues in the contemporaneous field of Liverpool theatre, the Sans Pareil being a popular spit and sawdust theatre playing to a lower class audience according to several accounts (Stonehouse, 1863; Broadbent, 1908; Macilwee, 2011). The area around the Amphitheatre was also home to other entertainments. In 1837, Queen Square accommodated the touring spectacle of a '85 feet long skeleton of a whale, found dead off Plymouth in 1831, on tour round the country in four large caravans' (Edwards, 2013). The Amphitheatre continued to attract diverse audiences through a mixed repertoire that included spectacle alongside the more mundane. This was not welcomed by everyone; Broadbent tells of some sailors who, objecting to the inclusion to the bill of a pictorial lecture on astronomy, shouted out: 'Look here, mister, we've had enough of this 'ere stuff; take your d[amned] stars away, and bring out the blooming horses' (1908, p.225).

This opening period of the Amphitheatre then is characterised by a wide range of entertainments. Boundaries between high and low art are porous, largely due to entrepreneurial managements and theatres which exist before subsidy. This is particularly true of the Amphitheatre with its performer managers and lack of patronage. In this time and place, 'the market declassifies culture: presenters of cultural events mix genres and cross boundaries to reach out to larger audiences' (DiMaggio, 2012, p.378). There is nonetheless a hierarchy in the field which needs to be protected, and this sanctioning of taste is done by the state through the bestowal of symbolic capital in the form of the royal patent. In the absence of such

consecration, the cultural capital being banked by the Amphitheatre is in the form of public popularity.

## **1840-1881 Legitimate Drama**

Saxon suggests that the 'character [of the Amphitheatre] had steadily been sinking under a succession of less expert managers' when, in 1840, equestrian Andrew Ducrow returned to the Amphitheatre as lessee. His return was apparently met with fanfare, 'the crowds were so great that the ferry boats plying the Mersey scheduled extra runs to accommodate spectators living on the other side of the water' (Saxon, 1978, p.335), although this may be exaggerated. By 1841 the theatre was known simply as the Royal Amphitheatre, and while Ducrow's company continued to play there, the Amphitheatre's repertoire moved further into the ambit of the New Theatre Royal, presenting drama including Shakespeare, alongside music hall acts. From a modern perspective, this move towards Shakespeare may be seen as a move towards a more middle class audience and a more '*bourgeois*' taste. However, according to Rose (2002), Shakespeare was popular among contemporary working class theatre audiences, and theatres showing Shakespeare would sell out the cheaper pit and the gallery, leaving the stalls seats half sold. Moreover, Shakespeare was seen as political, or at least his work was politicised by being quoted by radicals such as the Chartists and, as early as 1830, the nascent Labour movement (Thompson, 1980; Rose, 2002; Burwick, 2015): 'Shakespeare was a proletarian hero who spoke directly to working people' (Rose, 2002, pp. 122-123). Foulkes however suggests that it was equally possible that the more regular Shakespeare audiences of the patent theatres were willing to attend the minor theatres to get cheaper tickets; and the Amphitheatre management may have seen a gap in the market as a result of the (temporary) closing of the Theatre Royal in 1840, apparently due to the last manager sustaining a 'heavy loss', in common with many provincial theatres at this time (Lindfors, 2011, p.89).

The Amphitheatre's incursion into the field of legitimate drama did not go unchallenged by the Theatre Royal. In April 1843, the Theatre Royal prosecuted the Amphitheatre's manager, Hillier, for his presentation of a drama, *The Horse of the Rialto*. As Saxon suggests, 'the real issue, of course, was not Hillier's failure to obtain a license [sic.], but his drawing off patrons from the Theatre Royal' (1978, p.358). While the prosecution was successful, a month later the Theatre Royal was again to close temporarily due to receipts not covering expenses.

The Amphitheatre went on to stage mostly drama for the next 40 years. Its ability to present spoken word drama at a minor theatre reflected a change in political view, which suggested theatres should not have their repertoire restricted by the state but be allowed to operate in their own commercial interests. This culminated in the Theatre Regulations Act of 1843 (6 & 7 Vict c 68), which allowed minor theatres in London and the provinces to present 'legitimate drama' for the first time, and thus ended the Theatre Royal's virtual monopoly over drama in the town. Interestingly, chroniclers of Liverpool theatre history Broadbent (1905), Ackroyd (1996) and Lloyd (2015a) all suggest that the national oligopoly represented by the patent theatres was brought down due to an appeal by Liverpool's Liver Theatre which had been fined for presenting established dramas. However, the change in law is seen elsewhere as part of a larger and more complex picture (Davis, 2007; Ganzel, 1961).

The 1843 Theatres Act was to have far reaching and perhaps unforeseen consequences. As well as ending the oligopoly over legitimate drama, the Act prohibited the sale of alcohol in theatre auditoria, which meant a loss of income for many theatres. This prohibition was a new threat to theatre, and led directly to the development of music hall (Theatres Trust, 2015), in what Bratton calls 'the segregation of the vulgar' (2003, p.169). Public houses, untouched by the Theatres Act, were able to present musical entertainment alongside their food and drink and charged no admission, creating 'free and easies' (Broadbent, 1908, p.338). These proved

particularly popular with customers, and so ale houses and chop houses became lucrative enough to be demolished to make way for purpose-built venues presenting performance alongside food and drink. In Liverpool's Williamson Square, the Star was one such hostelry, and in 1847 advertised a concert room. Less than twenty years later, the New Star Music Hall would open 'beneath the shadow of the Theatre Royal' (Broadbent, 1908, p.342), seating almost 2,000 people. It was to become the Playhouse Theatre, now Liverpool's oldest theatre venue, a significant entrant to the field and a threat to both the Theatre Royal and the Amphitheatre.

From the 1840s, as well as presenting its main programme of drama, the Amphitheatre continued to be leased by various managements such as the Liverpool Temperance Dramatic Association, for short runs (Broadbent, 1908, p.227). In common with other theatres, the Amphitheatre had held since its inception what would today be called charity events such as the charity event for unemployed weavers mentioned earlier, and benefits (Horton, 2014; Broadbent, 1908). While the Amphitheatre did not hold the *Benefit for Mr Kite* memorialised in song on the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album ('For the benefit of Mr. Kite/There will be a show tonight on trampoline/The Hendersons will all be there/Late of Pablo Fanque's Fair, what a scene!' - Lennon and McCartney, 1967), Pablo Fanque, the popular black circus artist and proprietor mentioned in the song, had appeared at the Amphitheatre in 1833 (Broadbent, 1908, p.225), and again in 1841, and in the 1849-50 season (Turner, 2003).

By 1862, the Amphitheatre was almost forty years old, and this was beginning to show in the building. The Porcupine, 'A Liverpool newspaper' (National Archives, 2015b) wrote about it in the same (but by now not very complimentary) bracket as the Theatre Royal:

At the Theatre Royal the chairs in the dress circle are hard and far too small, and the sitting room in other parts of the house as beggarless and comfortless as possible. At the Ampitheatre...Behind the curtain matters are even worse. The stages above and

below, are encumbered with useless antiquated machinery: the dressing rooms are the veriest dog-holes, while the whole place - dangerous from absence of light is pervaded by noisome smells. That the musicians whose wretched fate it is to sit in the orchestras are ever free from colds and rheumatism speaks wonders for the acclimatising powers of human nature (Broadbent, 1908, p.170).

Clearly the Amphitheatre and the Theatre Royal needed further investment, although there is no indication they received any. The Amphitheatre also suffered from its particular placement in the commercial part of the town, dominated by fish markets, food markets, a bazaar, and retail and wholesale shops, as shown by contemporary maps.



*Figure 2: Map of the area around the Royal Amphitheatre, 1850*

*Central map pin shows Amphitheatre on the corner of Great Charlotte Street and Roe Street. Pin bottom left shows Theatre Royal in Williamson Square. Pin top right shows where the Empire Theatre will be built opposite the neoclassical St George's Hall.*

*(Source: Old Maps, 2014).*



In the same article in 1862, The Porcupine commented:

What can be worse than the locales of the Theatre Royal and the Royal Amphitheatre? Every sense is offended as the visitor approaches them. The stenches from market refuse and close, dank, reeking streets are even dangerous to health, while the sights and sounds are so offensive that hundreds of ladies are denied the pleasure of theatrical entertainments in consequence of having their eyes and ears polluted in a manner which will be well understood by allusion (in Broadbent, 1908, p.169).

During this period, further competition for both the Amphitheatre and the Theatre Royal arose locally in the form of the much more opulent New Prince of Wales Theatre and Opera House, later to be the Empire Theatre. Its opening in 1866 on Lime Street coincided with the expansion of its near neighbour, Lime Street Station, which boasted the largest arched train shed in the world; both were signs of Liverpool's growing wealth and confidence. The new theatre also complemented St George's Hall to create a grand neoclassical quarter, just a short walk but yet a world away from the commercial district of the Royal Court with its wholesale fruit sellers and its retail fish market. The New Prince of Wales Theatre was built with class and status in mind, both for its patrons and for the town:

The style is Italian treated in a free manner. The lower storey of the facade is composed of a series of five arches, with pilasters, surmounted by carved capitals...When the theatre was first opened the arch to the left was used as the entrance to the carriage-drive, leading to the principal parts of the house. That to the right was the entrance to the pit-circle; that in the centre for visitors to the stalls, dress-circle, etc. The two others formed shops, to one of which were attached extensive supper rooms. The lion heads in the above-named capitals serve for

ventilation, the mouths being pierced for the purpose. In the tympanum are heads of Shakespeare, Schiller, Moliere, Beethoven, and Rossini — emblematical of the Drama and Music. The entablature is of a rich and ornate character, containing panels in the frieze which serve as windows. The cornice is supported by carved medallions; and the whole is surmounted by a perforated and enriched balustrade. In fact the projectors of the building left nothing undone to render it one of the handsomest theatres in the provinces (Broadbent, 1908, p.303).

The 'grandiose luxury' and claims to the consecration of a canon of artists in a classical tradition speaks of aspiration to elitism and an international outlook through a separating mechanism that is realised physically in the separation of theatre entrances, and thus the classes of audience members. The interior, as reported by The Illustrated London News (in Lloyd, 2015b), was also in stark contrast to the interior of the Amphitheatre:

The interior is most conveniently arranged. As parties alight from the carriages they enter a roomy apartment, warmed by a stove, and handsomely furnished and decorated, which is intended for a waiting and conversation room. From this room a wide stair-case, 10 ft. wide, covered with a costly carpet, leads to a superb ante-room to the dress-circle. The decorations of this fine room are particularly rich. Ladies' rooms open from it, and by two large folding doors the circle is entered.

Reflecting the building, the programme at The New Prince of Wales Theatre and Opera House catered to the upper end of the market, showing mainly Italian opera such as *Il Trovatore* and *Nozze di Figaro*, sung in the original, alongside occasional ballet and Shakespeare 'revivals' (Broadbent, 1908). It attracted the theatre aristocracy of its day; Henry Irving played there, and Charles Kean was to give his final performance.

Also in 1866, but at the opposite end of the field, the Star Music Hall (later the Playhouse Theatre) opened on Williamson Square adjacent to the New Theatre Royal. The Star had been a chop house and concert room, but in line with the expansion of music halls it was invested in at a cost of some £22,000. It presented variety. This included 'patter', an 'ad lib gagging commentary' based on 'life in the street' in which the fourth wall was broken (Bailey, 1994, p.144), and its opening night included a 'sensation' song. The 'sensations' were a new fashion, works of popular culture in a range of forms including novels and plays, which 'deal[t] with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, *bourgeois*, domestic settings' (Brantlinger, 1982). The Star had stalls seats but also small tables and chairs which waiters wound around to serve refreshments, including alcoholic beverages. It was an immediate success according to Broadbent (1908, p.344), becoming one of the 'leading music halls of the country', showing 'high class entertainment', attracting the 'best talent', comedy, music, and had a Chairman with a gavel. It secured artists like acrobat Blondin, and also the Great Vance, who 'treat[ed] his hearers as old familiar friends, and takes them into his confidence, a process that they like immensely' (*The Era*, 1885, quoted in Bailey, 1994). It also included food and drink in the price of the ticket. This was perhaps more significant competition to the Amphitheatre, with its attraction to working class people who could not only afford to attend, but who could relax, eat, drink, and, most of all, participate. The Amphitheatre was being threatened at both poles of the field.

In 1875, Liverpool chronicler Picton described the Amphitheatre as an 'ordinary theatre' (as opposed to circus): 'The building and its arrangements are rough, uncouth, and slovenly' (p.193) but with 'merits' regarding sightlines and acoustics. In 1880, the year Liverpool finally achieved city status, the Amphitheatre was put up for auction, and its last ever performance was held in 1881. It was apparently a buoyant affair: 'On the last night, the Amphi' patrons were particularly lively, the gods and pittites especially so; for I am told that there was a continuous fusilade of

popping ginger-beer corks and veritable showers of nut shells from the gallery' (Broadbent, 1908, p.248). That was the last of the Amphitheatre, and its diet of circus then melodrama, and of rowdy participation.

This period has been a time of great change for the field of Liverpool theatre, in large part due to the changing and growing town and its civic ambitions. There has been some decline in established venues as more opulent venues suitable to the town's aspirations have come on stream, and also a threat from the opposite end of the field as less formal entertainments become popular. There is also a more clear demarcation between cultural boundaries and their relationship with class. With an end to state sanctioned taste that was signified by the Theatres Act, other ways have emerged for classes to display their distinction, with legitimate theatre being in sharp contrast to the entertainments provided in the 'free and easies'. Interestingly, both the style of playing at the Star Music Hall and its high value, low risk entertainment including food and drink are very similar to what is offered at the contemporary Royal Court, as discussed in Chapter 5.

### **1881-1938: The first Royal Court Theatre**

In 1881, the theatre was bought by Sir David Radcliffe for £20,000 (Broadbent, 1906). Radcliffe clearly had high ambitions for himself, the theatre and the new city; three years later, he was to become Liverpool's Lord Mayor, and he was 'instrumental in planning the Liverpool International Exhibition, the first such great international event to be held outside London', and which was opened by Queen Victoria (London Metropolitan Archives, 2015). Radcliffe 'had the auditorium gutted and rebuilt to designs by the local architect Henry Summers and the building reopened as the Royal Court Theatre' (Lloyd, 2015b), its name reflecting different aspirations for the venue. It opened with *The Lancashire Witches, or, King Jamie's frolic: a light opera in three acts*, a Restoration 'machine play', which were named for their rapidly changing scenery.

In 1884, the Royal Court was sold on again for £40,000 'to the famous Carl Rosa Opera Company', a German company whose mission was to popularise opera, and it went on to present light opera and host companies like the D'Oyley Carte, as well as two burlesque companies. The Royal Court also showed *Blue Beard*, starring legend of burlesques Nellie Farren, and *The Ticket of Leave Man*. This was a 'sensation' play, a form of melodrama with a sense of verisimilitude based on sophisticated technology (Voskuill, 2002, who gives examples of scenes with waterfalls and rushing trains). The Royal Court was again trading on spectacle, the novel, and the popular.

In 1885, the Royal Court's long time competitor, the Theatre Royal, finally closed its doors, having, the previous year, turned itself into a circus (Broadbent, 1908, p.176), somewhat against the fashion of the day. Its building became a cold storage, until the disused building was finally demolished in 1970 (Ackroyd, 1996, p.19). Meanwhile, also in Williamson Square, the Star (later the Playhouse) presented its last variety performance in 1898 and obtained a dramatic licence (Broadbent, 1908). What followed, according to Ackroyd, was 'Blood and Thunder melodrama' for 'popular taste' sold cheap (1996), and this continued to prove popular until 1911 when it was to traverse the field to become the valorised Liverpool Repertory Theatre.

In January of 1897 a fire seriously damaged the Royal Court (Ackroyd, 1996). Its manager, theatrical entrepreneur Robert Arthur, reopened it in five days, continuing the run of *Cinderella*, the Amphitheatre's 'annual', or pantomime (Ellacott, 2010; Ackroyd, 1996, p.25). Under Arthur, the 'annual' was to become of central importance to the Royal Court. Not only did it take a significant amount of money while it was being shown (£2,000 a week in 1906 according to Arthur in *The Liverpudlian*, quoted in Ellacott, 2010), but it was exported across the country, having a life cycle of about five years. As everything from the scenery to the jokes were manufactured in Liverpool, it must have represented quite an income for the Royal Court.

According to Ackroyd (1996, p.25), at the turn of the century, 'the Royal Court was a rendezvous deluxe for lovers of drama and opera in all their guises'. He paints a picture of different Royal Court audiences from those of the preceding burlesque years, saying that '[e]veryone who was anyone' could be seen in the theatre foyer, and 'carriages at 10.30pm provided transport for the most affluent of patrons'. The reference to 'opera and plays', the affluent audiences and the actors the theatre could now attract (such as Sir Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Beerbohm Tree, and Wilson Barrett according to Ackroyd, 1996, p.25) all suggest that the Royal Court had quickly stepped into the space in the field that had been left by the closure of the Theatre Royal.

Ackroyd's description hints at the great social change taking place at the turn of the century. Theatregoing was starting to compete with a growing range of leisure pursuits, some aimed at and enjoyed by working class people. Charles Booth (philanthropist and, as it happens, Liverpool ship owner according to Bulmer and Bales, 1991, and Inwood, 2005) was to undertake his survey of the London poor around this time. According to Stedman Jones (1983, p.207), Booth found that a distinct working class culture remained in London, and that its dominant cultural institutions were now 'the pub, the sporting paper, the race-course and the music-hall'. Theatre was not mentioned as a working class pursuit despite theatre and music hall being distinct lines of enquiry according to the surveyors' notebooks, and even the music hall was turning into variety (Everding, 1990). The increased availability of the other pastimes Booth mentions, and additional pursuits – such as paperback books, radio, and football – all competed for the limited time and money of working class people. This was bound to have an effect on the theatres. In Liverpool, an unprecedented four theatres (the Christian Street Circus, the Parthenon, the Queens Hall, and the Tivoli Palace of Varieties) closed in the sixteen years from 1900, having struggled to adapt to a changing and perhaps diminishing field; two (the Parthenon and the Tivoli) were early losses to moving pictures, being converted to cinemas (Ackroyd, 1996).

There is limited information about the Royal Court's repertoire at this time. The third volume of *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (Watson, 1971) shows *The Dippers*, an otherwise unpublished play by Ben Travers, author of the Aldwych farces, at the Royal Court, Liverpool in 1922, and the same playwright's *A Cuckoo in the Nest* in 1925. Farce by this point was a form associated with the middle classes according to Barker and Gale (2000, p.31), who comment specifically on the Aldwych farces:

Although the Aldwych plays do include some working-class characters they are not intended for the working classes. The clowns are middle class and designed to amuse a middle-class audience.

In 1926, the Royal Court took in a tour of *Paddy the Next Best Thing*, an adaptation by Gayer Mackay and Robert Ord of Gertude Page's novel, and a hit at the Savoy for 867 performances (MS38/2663/2565). The other tour venues for *Paddy* suggest that the Royal Court is now part of a group of theatres that would be called the 'number one circuit'. These were large theatres (invariably over 2,000 seats according to Iles, 2012), and made up of the original twelve 'authentic' patent-holders, plus the '*arriviste*' theatres, that is those outside of the original elite patent group but now allowed to style themselves 'Royal' (such as the Glasgow Theatre Royal, and indeed the Royal Court, Liverpool). Thus in the field of national touring, the Royal Court seems to have taken the place of the Theatre Royal on the legitimate theatre circuit securing established work and players.

The actors at the Royal Court around this time are first rate (if slightly fading) stars of more respectable music hall, and include Little Tich, Harry Lauder, George Robey and Harry Tate (Ackroyd, 1996, p.35), who numbered themselves among the 147 more reputable performers who had been invited to appear at the first 'Royal Music Hall Performance by Command of His Majesty the King', at the Palace Theatre in 1912 (Inwood, 2005; Cook, 2013).

In summary, with Sir David Radcliffe briefly at the Royal Court, we see not only a theatre owner who has been consecrated by the state, we perhaps see the Royal Court's first 'cultural capitalist'. DiMaggio's term (2012, p.303) denotes not just an entrepreneur capitalising on culture, but one who uses culture as a way to increase his own cultural capital, and that of his class. In this period too, the Royal Court seems to have moved into the space in the field made empty by its old rival, the Theatre Royal. For the first time, the Royal Court has started to bank more valorised capital by presenting work that is consecrated by dominant fractions of the dominant class, albeit consecrated by the popularity of its *bourgeois* appeal rather than for any intellectual or *avant-garde* claim. This change is taking place in the context of (and in response to) wider social change, where markers of taste are not so much related to different types of live performing art, but more around theatre versus popular entertainment such as cinema.

## **The interwar years**

According to Stevenson and Cook (2013, p.34), 'it has been claimed that the generation which grew up between the wars had a wider range of entertainment open to it than any in previous history'. Since its inception, cinema had competed with limited working class leisure time and money, and with some advantages over forms like music hall: 'the cinema did not share the dubious reputation of the Music Hall, it was comparatively cheap, and it encouraged the attendance of everyone in the family' (Bourke, 1994, p.151). According to Beaven (2005), the Depression also increased cinema-going due to its cheapness. According to Richards (1984, p.11), '*The Social Survey of Merseyside* reported in 1934 that "30 years have seen [cinema's] rise from little more than a scientific toy in a sideshow at fairs to one of the most important institutions in the country'. By the late 1930s, cinema 'was easily the most important form of mass entertainment' (Stevenson and Cook, 2013, p.34). In addition to cinema, there was competition for the working class audience from a proliferation of activities, including the



growth of the dance hall; sports, including cricket, football, boxing and dog racing; and the growing availability of cheap holidays and leisure pursuits such as cycling, rambling and a craze for keep fit (Stevenson and Cook, 2013). By 1935 *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* had already declared that theatre 'has only a limited appeal to the working class today' (Richards, 1984, p.11).

Liverpool did not escape these social changes, and given the fact of the city's wealth and its position as the second city of Empire, and the evidence of theatres already converting to cinemas in the earliest part of the century, it may have been at the forefront of change.

Certainly by the late 1930s, '40 per cent of the population [of Liverpool] visited cinemas once a week, while 25 per cent went twice or more' (Stevenson and Cook, 2013, p.34). According to Ackroyd (1996, p.35), the Royal Court suffered from the competition, as well as the competition from within the theatre field, particularly from the nearby Empire.

Moss Empires had taken over the Prince of Wales Theatre and renamed it the Empire Theatre in the early 1890s. Moss had made some serious investment in the Empire, refurbishing it, putting in electricity (ATG Tickets, 2015), and then in 1925 pulling it down and reopening it with the widest auditorium in Europe and the largest stage in Britain (Riley, 2012, p.107). The Empire showed big musicals once nightly and presented big American stars such as the Astaires and Tallulah Bankhead, and engaged cinema head-on with a revue called *The Reply to the Talkies*.

In 1912, Howard and Wyndham had taken over the much smaller Robert Arthur group of six theatres, including the Royal Court. In the early 1930s, ownership of the Royal Court shifted again, with the much larger Moss Empires allying with Howard and Wyndham. Given the success of the Liverpool theatres already owned by Moss Empires, it was unclear whether Moss took over the Royal Court to keep it as a going concern or to eliminate the competition. History suggests it was the latter, as, in 1933, Moss abruptly closed the Royal Court.

According to Ackroyd (1996, p.25), three months later the theatre was bought by a new company, The Royal Court Theatre Company. 'By August the same year it had gone over to Variety' (Lloyd, 2015b) presenting acts such as Geraldo and his Orchestra, and (perhaps faded) stars of music hall like Max Wall (Ackroyd, 1996, p.26). Only a month later, fire was to gut the building, which Ackroyd sees as a damnation by the 'Muses of Comedy and Tragedy' for presenting variety in a 'historic theatre' (p.26), although this is ironic given the theatre's history as a place of circus, melodrama, spectacle and sensation.

The interwar years had seen changes in the boundaries of the field, for instance, in ways theatres were owned. If the Victorian era was characterised by individual entrepreneur-performer-managers, this era has seen the evolution from professional managers and consortia of managers to small groups of theatres under one ownership, and finally to large national chains. The Royal Court has been caught up in such commercial struggles as the field is affected by homologous fields such as business and commerce. The Royal Court's repertoire has remained commercial and populist, although in the final moment of this period it is characterised by industrial, popular variety (Bourdieu, 1983, p.331), rather than reflecting the consecrated capital of *bourgeois* taste that it had previously banked.

### **1938-1979: The second Royal Court: opulence and gentility**

In 1938 the remaining façade of the Royal Court was finally demolished and rebuilt in the Art Deco style of the era under the joint ownership of the Robert Arthur Theatre Company with Howard and Wyndham (Ackroyd, 1996, p.109). Unlike the original building which had historically had its main face onto Great Charlotte Street, the new building had two equally decorative 'faces', curving from Roe Street to Great Charlotte Street, with the main box office on the corner. Contemporary programme illustrations emphasise the theatre's art deco grandeur and its prominent position, and de-emphasise its commercial setting in the city with the

neighbouring street markets and the retail fish market. With its San Stefano marble-paved box offices and walnut panelling, engraved mirrors, and concealed lighting, its boxes and its carved plasterwork, its gilded proscenium arch and red plush seats, its recessed lighting and gilded ceiling ribs, it was an impressive sight and was clearly aimed at a middle class theatre audience. In the basement, the wood-panelled lounge and bar was 'said to be a replica of the main lounge on the Queen Mary. A nautical theme runs through the design, in keeping with the traditions of the city' (Theatres Trust, 2015). At this time, a plaque was put up commemorating the theatre's history, enshrining its cultural capital.



*Figure 3: Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, 1950*

*Showing the opulent art deco building and its corner position on Roe Street (left of photograph) and Great Charlotte Street.*

*Source: Liverpool City Group, 2016*

An 'Official Opening Ceremony' was held and the theatre opened by the Lord Mayor. The first show was *Under Your Hat*, 'a spy story (with music and burlesque)' (Matthew et al., 2004), with Cicely Courtenage and Tom Hulbert, stars of music hall, revue and film (Ackroyd, 1996, p.105). By the 1940s, the large managements like Moss, and Howard and Wyndham, had a virtual monopoly (Cochrane, 2011) and the Royal Court was one of two Liverpool theatres on the 'number one' circuit, the other being the Empire (Cochrane, 2011), giving the managements a lot of pulling power for the big shows and the big stars. The Royal Court's repertoire consisted of light comedy, light opera and revues, as well as more serious work such as Shakespeare, by now canonised in *bourgeois* taste, and the occasional ballet. Social plays were presented by writers such as Bernard Shaw and Pinero, with stars such as Yvonne Arnaud. Programmes had the same corporate style from show to show, which was similar to other theatre programmes in the Howard and Wyndham chain. The theatre remained a commercial enterprise, but in a much more genteel way than it had in the previous century.



Figure 4: Royal Court Theatre programme, 1950s

*All of the Royal Court programmes looked like this while the Theatre was owned by Howard and Wyndham, and displayed the respectable desirability of the Theatre with its 'social air'.*

Source: Iles, 2011.

## War and post war

While there was devastation all around it, the Royal Court remained unscathed during World War II. Shows apparently continued for the duration, with D'Oyly Carte light operas *Iolanthe* and *Trial By Jury* and performers such as Novello, Fonteyn, Gielgud and Burton being presented. Following the War, the repertoire remained a conservative annual programme of ballet,

Shakespeare, and pantomime, with regular visits by The D'Oyly Carte. Television started to have an impact, further decreasing theatre attendance (Ackroyd, 1996). At this point, the Royal Court had more popular musicals in its repertoire, which it repeated – sometimes more than once – over the next twenty years. These included *Oklahoma* (1951, 1959 and 1967), *Brigadoon* (1952, 1963) and the *King and I* (1956, 1960) (Royal Court Trust, 2015). This may have been as a response to falling audiences, or hires to local amateur companies, indicating a possible decline. In 1956, the Glyndebourne Opera Company played the Royal Court, and in 1957 a young Judi Dench made her professional acting debut at the theatre.

The theatre was of course still adjacent to Queen Square, known as the 'Covent Garden of the North' for its fruit and vegetable market and wholesalers. At night, the Square was home to Liverpool's unofficial (and at the time illegal) 'gay quarter' from at least the 1940s until the 1970s (Edwards, 2012). 'By day, the square held a huge market where another generation of barrow boys and girls with weathered faces sold their fruit and veg. But after they had all locked up and gone home, the lights would come on in five or six little pubs' (Price, in *The Liverpool Echo*, 2007). Liverpool DJ Pete Price, who was one of the first 'out' public figures in Liverpool in the 1970s, reminisced: 'Of course, you had to be careful going into the Magic Clock. You didn't want to let your mum's friends catch a glimpse of you as they walked out of the Royal Court from a show' (*The Liverpool Echo*, 2007). There is a real sense of contrast between the lavish Royal Court building with its respectable clientele, and the *demi monde* that surrounded it.

The Royal Court of this period appears to be trading on *bourgeois* taste. It now has its symbolic capital enshrined in its opulent new building, which has been valorised by dignitaries. Its banked capital is symbolised by the brass plaque in its foyer, celebrating and commemorating but also conserving its history. The plaque has not only been preserved but added to, showing the importance of the history to the Theatre.



*Figure 5: Plaque commemorating the Royal Court's history*

*Preserved and extended brass plaque in the Royal Court foyer charting the theatre's ownership and demonstrating the importance of enshrining the Theatre's history.*

*Author's photo, 26/3/14.*

## **1960-1979: Marginalisation**

In 1962, the Ravenscroft Development proposed a remodelling of much of Liverpool town centre, including a series of modern shopping centres or 'precincts' replacing the original markets in the Queen Square area. It is difficult to see whether the Royal Court would have continued to exist under this development; its approximate position on the plan is earmarked as 'St. John's Precinct' (Wilkinson, 2014). In tandem, the Shankland Plan for the Liverpool Inner Motorway (Marshall, 2015) suggested a modern and radical approach to traversing the city with elevated walkways above the traffic divorcing pedestrians from the street, as well as a new civic centre on Queen Square.

While both developments were only partially achieved, they had a significant effect on Liverpool city centre and particularly the environment around the Royal Court. The grand old St John's Market was demolished and the thoroughfare of Great Charlotte Street was truncated to make way for the new St John's precinct and the building of 'the Beacon', an iconic landmark now known as Radio City Tower. This removed the prominent corner position of the Royal Court, giving it only one 'face' on to Roe Street and squeezing the second face of the deco building against the modern concrete precinct. In 1967, the last of the fruit merchants left the Queen Square area (Edwards, 2013), cleaning it up to make way for the new civic centre. However this was never realised and the space where iconic buildings such as the Stork Hotel and, for the gay community, the Magic Clock public house, used to be became a car park. Elevated walkways were built, some of them leading to the non-existent civic centre, and these and the major new bus terminal on Roe Street effectively marginalised the Royal Court as they removed passing trade and symbolically as well as physically cut the theatre off from the city.

Through the 1960s, the Royal Court seemed to stagger on despite dwindling theatre audiences, a mixed repertoire, and the devastation that was happening all around it. In 1960 it presented Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste Of Honey* which had first been produced by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop only two years earlier, before it had transferred to the West End. The play, an exploration of class, race, gender and sexuality, seems a brave choice, and perhaps an attempt to turn the repertoire in the direction of the *avant-garde*. In the same year the theatre presented Behan's *The Hostage*, also from Littlewood's repertoire, which contains formal challenges such as the breaking of the 'fourth wall'. However the wider repertoire was eclectic, including crowd pleasers like comedian Ken Dodd, musical *South Pacific* with Jean Boht, and in 1965, a 61-year-old siren of the silver screen, Marlene Dietrich, in concert (Hall, 2014).



By the late 1960s, the theatre was characterised by losses, closures, and re-openings (Ackroyd, 1996). In 1968 the theatre became a bingo hall for a short time. Ken Dodd continued to play gigs in order to save the theatre. After a long summer closure in 1970, he did so again, with a four-month long *Laughter Spectacular* (Ackroyd, 1996), which suggests great commitment but also an air of desperation. In 1972, a projection suite was added to the back of the stalls and the theatre was sub-let to Hutchinsons Cinemas Ltd (Ackroyd, 1996; Theatres Trust, 2015). There is no information about the film programme, although Grundy states that Hutchinsons presented ‘a very successful season of films over the Summer months’ (2009). Grundy’s photograph (2010) taken more than 20 years later in 1994 clearly shows the projection box at the rear of the stalls, as well as the projection portholes round the gallery. Between 1973 and 1975, the theatre continued to show ‘varied live entertainment supplemented by films’ (Ackroyd, 1996, p.109).



*Figure 6: ‘The Court’ in 1994*

*Photographer Ian Grundy’s photograph shows the projection box at the back of the auditorium.*

*Source: Grundy (2010)*

Photographs of Roe Street in the following years show the results of urban planning in which a combination of a major road, a bus terminal, and a pedestrian bridge not only mars the view but also effectively cuts off the theatre (1977, in *The Four Squares*, 2015). The former site of the fruit market at Queen Square was still an interim car park, and the 'bubble bus stops' or gyratory opposite the Royal Court Theatre meant that Roe Street was difficult to cross. Overall the Royal Court became an unloved theatre in an unloved part of town.

In 1976, the struggling theatre was finally taken over by Merseyside County Council (Theatres Trust, 2014), which set up a trust to manage it (Ackroyd, 1996, p.109); the following year, Merseyside County Council also had to take over the Empire. Again programming was mixed at the Royal Court and the venue was used for various purposes, even as a centre to inoculate children. At Christmas 1978 there was a successful Ken Dodd *Laughter Spectacular* (Ackroyd, 1996, p.109), followed by a couple of plays. Sadly, even Dodd's work was finally not enough to keep the theatre open, and in June the 1979 Royal Court Theatre closed again. The Arts Council of Great Britain was approached to help keep the theatre open, but had no interest according to Ackroyd (1996, p.109), possibly as it was investing capital funds in the Empire (Ackroyd, 1996, p.104) alongside revenue funding of both the Playhouse and comparative newcomer the Everyman. Owning two theatres which competed for similar repertoire and a similar market was clearly problematic, and the County Council seemed to choose in favour of the Empire (Ackroyd, 1996, p.104), and the Royal Court remained closed.

Following this, the Royal Court was let on a series of short-term licences to commercial operators (Fagan and Clark, 2015), the first of which, according to Ackroyd (1996), was to Liverpool taxi drivers Knipe and Beckett. Under this management, the Royal Court presented plays, pop music and family entertainment, including more Ken Dodd, and *The Lord Mayor's Grand Variety Performance*, with occasional theatre such as *Oh! Calcutta*, and television's family

favourite *Dusty Bin*, presumably on a hires basis. There seemed to be nowhere else to go; the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, had finally been eclipsed in its field.

This period witnessed the marginalisation of the theatre both symbolically and in terms of its physical presence in the city but also in its cultural importance to Liverpool. Other agents in the field dominated the various fractions and the Royal Court struggled to maintain its place, and again shifted from legitimate theatre to more 'industrial', popular work (Bourdieu, 1983, p.331).

### **1979-2005: Liverpool's rock and roll theatre**

The following period was to be a significant departure for the Royal Court. A company from the Isle of Man, Douglas Entertainments, ran the Royal Court for a season. By the end of 1979, the Royal Court was again struggling, so former Beatle Paul McCartney was persuaded to open his band Wings's tour at the theatre (Guy, 2012b). The theatre was then leased by music entrepreneurs Simon Geddes and Dave C; Geddes had previously worked at local music venue Erics [sic.] and the pair had run local club The Warehouse. Despite regularly hosting variety acts such as hypnotist Andrew Newton, and pantomimes like *Snow White* (December 1981, according to Ellacott, 2010), the Royal Court quickly became 'a leading rock music venue' (Ackroyd, 1996, p.109), which it remained for more than twenty-five years. From this point, the theatre was primarily used as a venue for bands, hosting big names such as R.E.M., David Bowie, George Michael, and Oasis, and local groups such as Frankie Goes to Hollywood and The Farm.

It is this period that many present day audience members talk about nostalgically on social media and elsewhere, with the Royal Court's Facebook group (2015) for instance regularly bursting into reminiscence and a display of photographed ticket stubs attesting to attendance at seminal music events. The venue becomes mythic in this reminiscence, symbolic not only of a time and a place but of youth, tribe, and a sense of ownership and belonging. This love for the

venue is, for some theatregoers, part of what makes the venue accessible and welcoming today. It is then worth examining this period in more detail, in terms of its programming and audiences, and also in terms of the venue and its environment.

According to interviewee Simon Bell who worked at the theatre throughout the 1980s, 'the Court' as it became known attracted a mixture of acts at all stages of the life cycle, including those on the decline, local indie bands, and also big acts in their maturity who wanted to play Liverpool or the North West and, in the absence of many arena venues at that time, played the 2,200 seat Royal Court. Some bands at the more established end chose to play the Empire, which was slightly bigger than the Court. However, the fact that the Empire was all-seated often made the Court, which had stripped out its stalls seating to make downstairs standing (or dancing) room only, preferable to artists.

According to Bell, there was no identifiable or regular Royal Court audience at this point, but rather a series of audience segments or discreet subcultures corresponding to the act being presented. Bands like The Clash and The Damned attracted punks; bands such as the Sisters of Mercy, and the Jesus and Mary Chain brought in Goths; power guitarists drew in the rockers; and each audience made the space their own. A few years on, '80s acts would appeal to a pop crowd. The local and indie scene was represented by bands like the Icicle Works. At the height of their success, Echo and the Bunnymen played as part of a tour; at the end of the show, Bell remembers guitarist Will Sergeant popping over Roe Street to get the bus home.

Various campaigning events were also held at the Court in this period. In 1985, *Drums Over the Mersey* featured a range of bands as part of an anti-heroin campaign. In 1986, *From Manchester With Love* was organised, according to music writer Kevin Sampson (in Guy, 2012b):

[to] raise profile, awareness and funds, and as a general show of support for the 49 sacked Labour councillors who were facing an arduous and expensive legal

appeal...The gig was an instant sell-out, of course, and the Royal Court's combination of tatty glamour and ampitheatre [sic] acoustics made for a wild and joyous atmosphere. I've seen so many great bands and had so many great nights at The Royal Court, but that was the greatest of them all.

One of the first public responses to the Hillsborough disaster and subsequent cover up<sup>4</sup> in 1989 was a gig at the Royal Court in aid of the justice campaigns. According to Bell, this was reflective of the music scene at the time, as well as of Liverpool being a campaigning and politicised city. This sense of Liverpool as a space of activism is important to its sense of self, which is further explored in Chapter 6.

By the late 1980s the World Downstairs, a club night, was held in the Royal Court's Queen Mary basement on Mondays; this later became part of the rave scene, playing 'Scouse House' (Lees, 2011). Geddes also ran a club night, Klub Court, at a nightclub in Liverpool city centre (Maghull.biz, 2013). The Theatre itself acted as a central box office, selling tickets for rock and pop gigs at other local venues such as Liverpool University's Mountford Hall, as well as for one-off events such as rock gigs at Donington Park in Leicestershire. In 1991 and 1992 the two trusts set up to manage the theatre and arts aspects of the operation were allowed to close (Charities Commission, 2015).

The theatre took a 'no-frills' approach to its auditorium. In 1980, the Court had been converted into a 'Concert and Cabaret Venue' (Lloyd, 2015b), which meant the traditional plush stalls seats were stripped out leaving a raked floor with standing room only, and two tiers of seated balcony

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<sup>4</sup> In 1989, police failings led to the deaths by crushing of 96 Liverpool fans at Hillsborough. The police covered up their actions on the day, including using elements of the tabloid press to blame football fans for the crush. The subsequent fight for justice by the families and campaign groups led to the overturning of the 'accidental death' verdicts in 2016 to be replaced by verdicts of 'unlawful killing', and exposure of a trail of police corruption. This 27-year fight for justice has been characterised in some quarters as brave and principled solidarity, but in others as an expression of Liverpool as 'self-pity city' and the families as emotionally incontinent and without dignity.

above. The auditorium had a real effect on how the space was enjoyed, and later remembered.

Kevin McManus, former NME writer, preferred ‘intimate’ venues such as Erics and the Warehouse:

But I always made an exception for the Royal Court – not just because it was regularly the only place to see my favourite bands but because on the right night, with the right band, it was a really special place. It was rough and ready like all the best venues and on the best nights a really passionate crowd bouncing up and down on that huge sloping floor (Guy, 2012b).



*Figure 7: Photograph showing an audience enjoying an unnamed band at ‘the Court’*

*Source: Guy, 2012b.*

The boxes, the proscenium, and the gilding were all still there, but slowly fading. Bell describes the ‘lovely old building’, but says people were freezing cold inside, and became really hot once the stage lights warmed up. Journalist Peter Guy vividly describes the auditorium from the perspective of a first-time concert-goer, at a Therapy? gig in 1994:

As we rolled inside this ashtray of a venue, the smell of stale ale, stale bodies and cigarette smoke almost knocked me out. Thirty minutes later the lights went down and a deep red spotlight lit up Andy Cairns' [Therapy?'s lead singer] face as they launched into the pulverising [song] *Knives*. For 90 minutes my feet barely touched the ground as I was relentlessly thrown about on a sea of sweat-soaked limbs, clutching my battered glasses like my life depended on it (Guy, 2012b).

He loved it. The stripped-back nature of the stalls and the run-down state of the building were actually an advantage. People could bring their drinks into the auditorium, which became a relaxed and spontaneous space which the different subcultures could make their own.

Interviewee Simon Bell:

what people wanted was to go to a gig wearing whatever, which was usually associated with what type of music you liked, and that was always completely and utterly acceptable in the Royal Court...you could talk about it being tribal...that wasn't a venue that was seen as belonging to any particular subculture, it was like 'ours for this night'.

This sense of the tribal is echoed by others, for instance gig-goer Dickie Felton: 'I was transfixed by the deafening noise, the atmosphere and pockets of vomit. Like standing on the Kop for the very first time, it was a teenage discovery where I felt "this is where I belong"' (Guy, 2012a). This comparison is telling. The Kop is the most famous terrace at Anfield, the home of Liverpool Football Club (named for a hill, the Spion Kop, after the site of a battle in the Boer War). It reflects the tribal sense of ownership of the space, the immersiveness of the experience, but also a sense of social class. Going to the match and going to a gig were part of a working class culture in the 1980s that also encompassed drinking and specific styles of dress. It was often (although not universally) a white, male culture. In its time as a music venue, the Royal Court

made a home for working class people, who claimed symbolic ownership of a theatre, which had been both generically (as a theatre) and specifically (as the Royal Court with its boxes and marble and gilding, and its sometime *bourgeois* repertoire) a symbol of *bourgeois* culture. In many ways, its free and easy atmosphere, the ability to drink in the auditorium, and for audiences to make the space their own, was more similar to the circus atmosphere of the 1820s and '30s in the old Amphitheatre than in the intervening hundred years. This is also the Royal Court that is remembered by many theatregoers today. The nostalgia for the venue during these years despite, and perhaps because of, all its flaws is apparent on the Royal Court's Facebook site, and in some of the interviews in the later chapters of this study. It is one of the things that still contribute to the feelings people have about the venue in its current incarnation.

While the rock venue was clearly loved, there seemed to be other plans for the theatre. In 1994, concern for the dilapidated state of the building had led to the setting up of the Royal Court Theatre Trust (*Liverpool Echo*, 2005). In 2001, there was an 'official reopening' of a refurbished Royal Court. This took the form of local talent and comedians such as Mickey Finn and DJ Pete Price, as well as dance troupes and singers. This would appear to be an attempt to reposition the theatre along the lines of latter-day variety rather than a celebration or consolidation of its success as a gig venue. In 1992, the theatre building had been Grade II listed (Historic England, 2015), and in 1996, producer Thelma Holt had presented the Dublin Abbey Theatre's production of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* via a hire of the theatre by the more *avant-garde* Everyman under administrator Kevin Fearon. This occasioned much discussion by the attendant arts community about the poor state of repair of what had been a beautiful art deco building that had been 'allowed to become semi-derelict in the 1980s' (*Liverpool Echo*, 2005). The *Echo's* sister paper, *The Liverpool Daily Post*, would later see Holt's production as the start of a 'fight to keep the theatre open' (2002), but as a theatre rather than



a rock venue; moreover, the *Post* suggested this fight was led by Simon Geddes himself. The *Post* appeared triumphant that:

It is [a] fight [Geddes] seems to be winning as the Royal Court gradually moves from an allrock [sic.] venue to a theatre taking in classic theatre drama, arts events and occasional music acts...The current season does at last look like a proper theatre season with Irish writer/ actor Brendan O'Carroll's comedy *The Course* completing a long run at the theatre...followed...with a music concert featuring [band] The Real People...another run...of local comedy about a taxi driver, *Night Collar*. Johnny Vegas headlines his own show...in aid of Walton Neurological Centre and Donizetti's opera *Emilia di Liverpool* goes on stage July 24-27. Elvis impersonator Liberty Mounten and his orchestra mark the 25th anniversary of Presley's death with a show...and North West comic Peter Kay will make three appearances...Queen tribute band are there...and the Moscow Ballet performs *Swan Lake*...Other shows in the season include a 1980s nostalgia night with Go West (Liverpool Daily Post, 2002).

It is interesting that the writer for the *Post* sees this as 'a proper theatre season'; on the face of it, it seems to be an oddly mixed repertoire, with pop, theatre, comedy, opera and ballet fighting to come to focus. It is very like the early years of the Amphitheatre with its very mixed programming, its benefits, and its sense of something for everyone. The venue struggled on in this vein for a couple of years, primarily known as a music venue, hosting the Manic Street Preachers and the White Stripes but with strange bedfellows like West Kirby Light Opera's *My Fair Lady* (West Kirby Light Opera Society, 2003).

In 2003, new comedy *Slappers and Slapheads* was produced at the Royal Court by Kevin Fearon as part of Liverpool Comedy Festival. Fearon had been the Executive Producer of the Everyman Theatre following its reopening in 1993, where he had created *Rawhide*, which started as a

monthly stand-up comedy night in the Everyman Foyer bar. By this point *Rawhide* had presented over 500 shows in several venues (*Liverpool Echo*, 2003). *Slappers and Slapheads* was co-written by local writer Fred Lawless, featured a local cast, and was apparently based on a night out in Liverpool's *Grafton* nightclub. It was a foretaste of things to come.

While there had been occasional theatrical presentations, most notably the pantomime, throughout this period the Royal Court was really on the periphery of the field of Liverpool theatre and more in the field of popular music, alongside venues like Mountford Hall. However in another sense it had returned to its roots as a place of popular rather than valorised entertainment. Moreover, the venue had gone from a space of *bourgeois* theatre that was perhaps out of reach for many working class people, to a space which subcultures of different classes could make their own. The affection for 'the Court' reveals tropes that feed into the idea of audience members feeling 'at home' in the current iteration of the Royal Court, and these are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

## **2005-present day: Scouse Comedy**

In 2005, the Royal Court was extensively refurbished, and expecting more gigs including comeback performances by local bands The La's and Echo and the Bunnymen. Instead, in what was apparently a surprise move, the lease was passed overnight to Fearon's Rawhide Comedy Club, and all planned music gigs were cancelled. *Rawhide* gigs took place on Friday and Saturday at the Downstairs Bar of the Royal Court; dinner was served beforehand and drinks were available throughout the show. There was an occasional stand up gig upstairs in the auditorium; six months later in November 2005, on the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the theatre's foundation stone being laid, the once anti-establishment comedian Ben Elton took to the main stage with observational alternative comedy, enjoyed by a 'capacity crowd' (O'Connor, 2005).

In 2006, the first production of *Brick up the Mersey Tunnels* by Dave Kirby and Nicky Allt became 'one of the biggest success stories of the theatre's history' according to a poster on the Theatre's facade. Following this, the building became a full time theatre again, 'with a strong local following' (Royal Court poster). The subsequent repertoire has included Willy Russell standard *Our Day Out - the Musical* shown at the Royal Court for the first time in 2009, and regular Scouse pantomimes. In 2012, Fearon said 'We have been working hard to produce work that has a real connection with the people of Liverpool' (Lee, 2012), and a 'Scouse' repertoire has developed; this is discussed further in Chapter 6. According to Susan Lee in *The Liverpool Echo* (2012), 'The Royal Court has a special place in Liverpool's heart and now, with productions like *Brick up the Mersey Tunnels*, it feels once again like a theatre for the people'. How it is a theatre for the people, and what the people who go to the theatre think and feel about it, is the focus of the following chapters.

## Conclusion

In summary, as the Amphitheatre, the Royal Court began as a place of mass entertainment and spectacle, with porous boundaries between high and low art reflecting both the time and its exclusion from state sanctioned taste. From 1840, it moved into the arena of legitimate drama, reacting to changes in the field, the city, and the law, but clearly still had a diverse repertoire and drew audiences from a wide range of social backgrounds. From 1881, the Theatre became more consecrated not only as a legitimate commercial venture but one from which cultural capital could be generated; this is reflected in a name change, to the Royal Court. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Royal Court started to show more legitimate work, reflecting wider social change, with audiences becoming more stratified. By now, markers of taste (and class) became not so much related to different types of live performing art, but more about the distinction between theatregoing and popular entertainment such as cinema.

Management of the Royal Court in the interwar years reflected the wider evolution from professional managers and consortia, to small groups of theatres under one ownership, and finally to large national chains. From 1938, the Royal Court traded on *bourgeois* taste, banking its historical, symbolic capital by enshrining it in its opulent new building. From 1960, the Royal Court became marginalised physically, symbolically and in its cultural importance to Liverpool, and struggled to maintain its position in the field, shifting from legitimate theatre to more popular work. From 1979, the Royal Court dropped out of the field of Liverpool theatre altogether, instead entering the field of popular music. The affection for 'The Court' at this time is important in understanding the affection and sense of nostalgia some audience members have for it now. Finally, from 2005, the arrival of a new management saw the gestation of the Royal Court's relationship with Scouse comedy.

In more general terms, this chapter shows how theatre and theatregoing are mechanisms used not just to reflect and exhibit class, but to legitimate it. This is perhaps most starkly demonstrated in the state-sanctioned taste that was expressed through the monopoly of the royal patent. However, the revoking of patents in the Theatre Regulations Act of 1843 (6 & 7 Vict c 68) did not remove distinction between theatres or audiences. Instead, distinction became increasingly marked, first within the field of theatre by a widening gulf between high culture and popular culture (and this was reflected in theatre buildings); and then between theatre and other forms of popular culture, such as cinema. The changing sorts of entertainment on offer at theatres like the Royal Court made them less attractive to working class people, not least because they were less reflective of their lives. Thus, despite removing some of the more visible signs of distinction such as separate entrances, separate rest areas, and backless seats, theatre remains a site for struggle.

This history also reveals much about the nature of fields. It demonstrates the precarious nature of agents (such as theatres) in the field, showing how boundaries (such as those between patent and minor theatres, or legitimate and popular work) change, and how they become more or less porous, as well as how agents have to change and adapt to the field as it changes and as other agents enter, exit, or make claims on different positions.

It has also demonstrated the Royal Court's close relationship with the changing landscape of an evolving Liverpool, first as a growing town, then as a major city, and finally as a declining industrial centre. The physical siting of the Royal Court, once a prominent landmark in a mercantile quarter that became increasingly marginalised as the city was developed around it, is important in how people view the Royal Court today. Its siting in contemporary Liverpool is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

This chapter also alludes to the city's sense of itself, for instance as a radical space. It has demonstrated the changing importance and function of the Royal Court locally. This is important in understanding Liverpool not only as a site (and cultural context) for the current Royal Court Theatre, but also as a subject on its stage, and a space in the imaginary of working class theatregoing in Liverpool. The relationship between Liverpool and its current repertoire is the focus of Chapter 6. The next chapter, *The theatre in the city*, further contextualises the Royal Court in the city by examining contemporary theatre provision in Liverpool through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of field.

## Chapter 4. The theatre in the city: the Royal Court in the field of Liverpool theatre

The previous chapter examined the history of the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, within its historical fields. It has seen the various strategies used by the Royal Court, and by other theatres, to gain specific positions at various times within the changing field of Liverpool theatre. The concept of *champ* or field, which Bourdieu developed in writing and through lectures from around 1960 (1990a, p.22) is a main precept of his work; it is the third element of his conceptual triad, bound up with capital and *habitus*. This chapter outlines the contemporaneous field of Liverpool theatre and the Royal Court's place within it, using Bourdieu's process as outlined in *Questions of Method* (1989b). The chapter starts by outlining Bourdieu's concept of field with particular reference to his analysis of the field of cultural production. It posits Liverpool theatre as such an autonomous field and site of struggle in which positions are taken, and follows Bourdieu's three-part method of analysing a field to determine the relative positionings of 'agents' (institutions) within the field. First it constructs the

'boundaries' and separations of the field (1989b, p.28). It then examines indicators of 'specific capital' (1989b, p.28) in the field of Liverpool theatre, particularly ticket prices, size and social characteristics of audiences, and the lengths of the production cycles. It then applies these to the specifics of the theatres within the field. Finally, it examines the 'bank of specific capital' (1989b, p.28) by attempting to capture the dynamism of the field as a space of 'position-takings' in which different capitals are accrued. This places the Royal Court within the field of contemporaneous Liverpool theatre, examining how it uses its own strategies of conservation and subversion to maintain its position in the field. The chapter draws on Bourdieu's discussions of the field of cultural production and specifically theatre, and on his discussion of other fields as he suggests that fields are generally homologous (Bourdieu, 1989b).

### **Bourdieu's concept of field**

Bourdieu developed his concept of field and its relationship with *habitus* and capitals both in theoretical terms and by applying the theory to various fields such as the state, sport, science and the law. In his works *The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed* (1983), *Distinction* (2010), and later *The Rules of Art* (1996), Bourdieu specifically examines the field of cultural production, encompassing both theatre and literature, as an example of a field of struggle where agents (individuals, organisations) compete to gain greater volumes of capital. Further, he suggests that the homologies of field mean that generic and even specific descriptions or analyses of field can be transposed to other fields, while acknowledging the differences between those fields (1996, p.214). This is particularly helpful in gaining a full understanding of the concept of field and applying it to theatre. It is also helpful to remember that in his conception of field, Bourdieu was interested in the relational rather than the specific, that is the relationship with power that is expressed by, through and within a field by its various distinctions and separations, rather than culturally specific markers of players within a field.

Thus Bourdieu's concept of field is of an independent sociological space, the 'objective, external structure' (1989b, p.20) in which agents, in possession of varying sorts of *habitus* and capital appropriate to that field, vie for power; it is a space of 'position takings' (1996, p.231). This vying of agents to distinguish themselves is not always conscious, but is an inevitable product of the field. Fields are autonomous spaces with their own rules and '*nomos*', but have a similar structure to the wider social world, and events in the wider world (here Bourdieu gives the examples of economic crises and feminist movements, among others) are refracted through the field 'according to the specific rules of this field and according to the specific interests of the agents who compete in it' (1989b, p.26).

## **The cultural field**

The cultural field then is an autonomous space inside the wider social world, itself a field of power. According to Neveu (2007), Bourdieu sees contemporary society as 'structured around a basic opposition between 'temporal' (economic) and 'spiritual' (cultural) power, with the latter being weaker. So fields are structured by distributions of these specific capitals, with economic capital dominating in the wider social field. However, within cultural fields themselves, those oppositions are overturned. In *The field of cultural production*, (1983), Bourdieu introduces the idea of 'the economic world reversed' in that there is 'an interest in disinterestedness' (p.311) by those in the artistic field. Here, the normal rules of the wider society in which economic capital is paramount are inverted, and other 'profits' such as literary prestige become more important – in fact, economic capital (such as being popular, a 'bestseller' for instance) can actually be detrimental. In *The Rules of Art* (1996), Bourdieu reiterates this idea that the space of cultural production is governed by economic and social or cultural capital, which are competed for or endowed in inverse proportions:



It follows that [fields] are at any one time the site of a struggle between two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, which favours those who dominate the field economically and politically (for example, 'bourgeois art'), and the autonomous principle (for example, 'art for art's sake') (1996, p.216).

This creates an ongoing tension in any cultural field, in which agents struggle to gain the right sorts of capital, that which is valued by the field autonomously (cultural capital), and that which is heteronomous to the external field (economic capital), in order to dominate the field. They do this by adopting (often unconscious) strategies of distinction. This has been seen in the previous chapter, where agents (theatres) vied for position, moving into each other's ambits or adopting strategies of differentiation, in an attempt to gain and bank different sorts of capital.

According to Bourdieu, in the field of cultural production there are three 'competing principles of legitimacy' (1983, p.331). These are the legitimacy producers bestow on other producers, which he characterises as 'art for art's sake'; 'legitimacy corresponding to "*bourgeois*" taste' consecrated by the dominant fractions of the dominant class or academies; and 'popular' legitimacy, that is of the 'mass market'. In his discussions of the cultural field (1983; 2010; 1996), Bourdieu identifies 'quadrants' of the field that are positioned in relation to volumes of capital, showing the inverse relationship of autonomous cultural capital (autonomous within its cultural subfield) and heteronomous economic capital (heteronomous in the larger social field). In *The Rules of Art* (1996, p.124), he maps this in a diagram which charts the poles of relative capitals (Figure 8). Symbolically, 'art for art's sake' is placed on the left and *bourgeois* taste on the right, to mirror the left and right banks of the Seine in which such theatre is situated (1996) as well as its political orientation (2010, p.11).

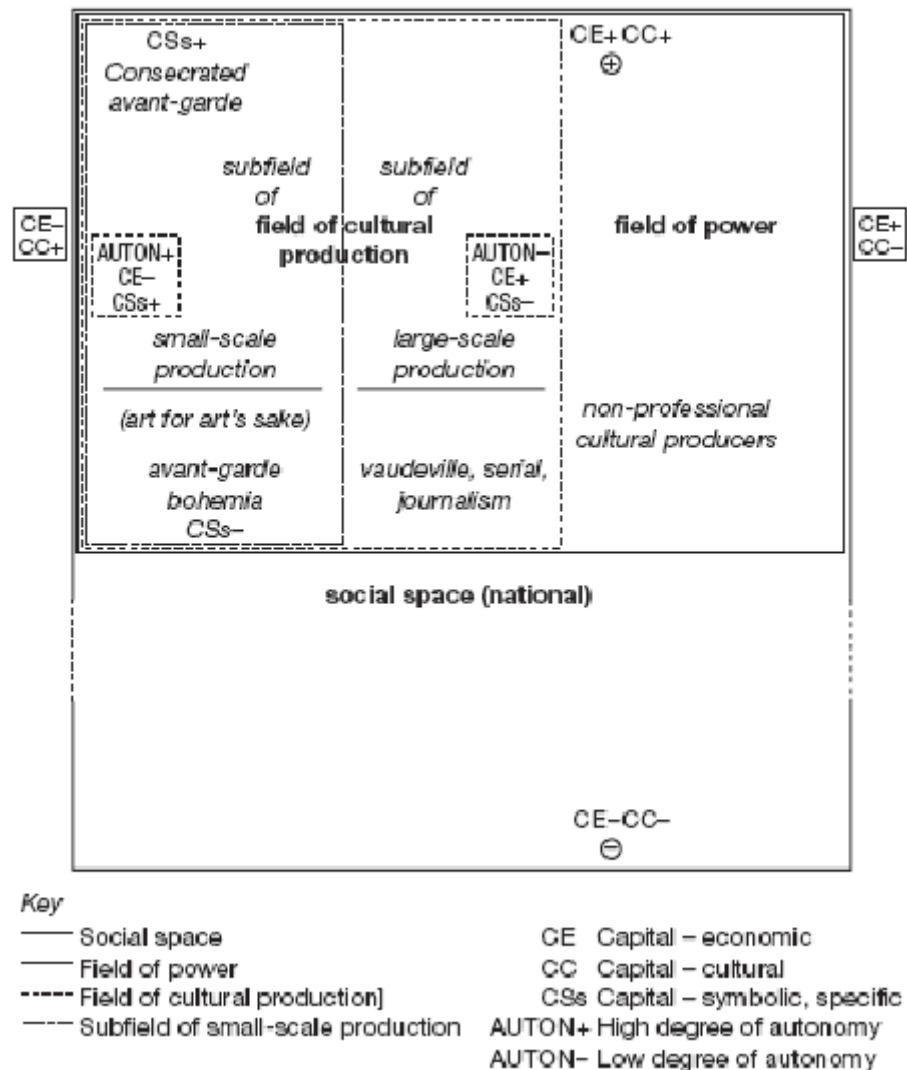


Figure 8: 'The field of cultural production in the field of power and in social space'

The field of cultural production is represented by the rectangle within the dotted line, top left, sitting within the wider social space. Within the field of cultural production, the notional y axis (top to bottom) shows overall volume of capital, with high total volume of capital at the top and low total volume of capital at the bottom. The notional x axis (left to right) shows the inverse relationship of economic and cultural capital, with high cultural capital and low economic capital on the left, and high economic and low cultural capital on the right.

Source: Bourdieu (1996, p.124).

Bourdieu goes on to apply this model to particular cultural forms at particular times, for instance literary art forms in the second half of the 19th century, of which one is drama. He maps this to show relative possession of overall volumes of capital, and agents' relative possession of

autonomous cultural capital (autonomous within its cultural subfield) and heteronomous economic capital (heteronomous in the larger social field) (Figure 9).

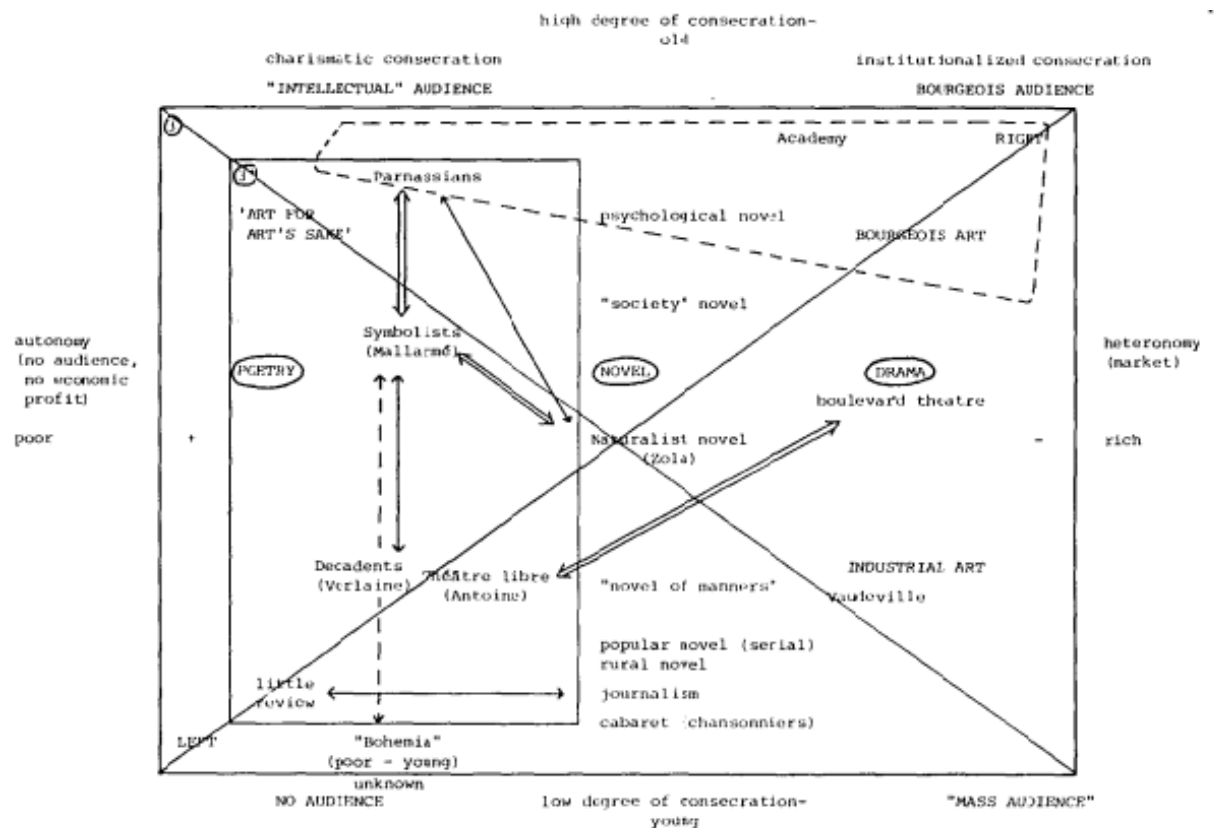


Figure 9: 'French literary field in the second half of the 19th century'

Again, the notional y axis (top to bottom) shows overall volume of capital, with high total volume of capital at the top and low total volume of capital at the bottom. The notional x axis (left to right) shows the inverse relationship of economic and cultural capital, with high cultural capital and low economic capital on the left, and high economic and low cultural capital on the right. Bourdieu places poetry, the novel and drama in three columns according to their relative economic and cultural capital.

Source: Bourdieu (1983, p.329).

This mapping of fields into relative spaces and the subsequent application of the theory by analysing agents (cultural institutions, forms and artefacts) within the field based on various characteristics is particularly helpful in conceptualising other fields such as the field of Liverpool theatre. Collecting together some of the various descriptors Bourdieu gives of different fractions

of the field of cultural production can provide a framework to inform the analysis of the field of Liverpool theatre.

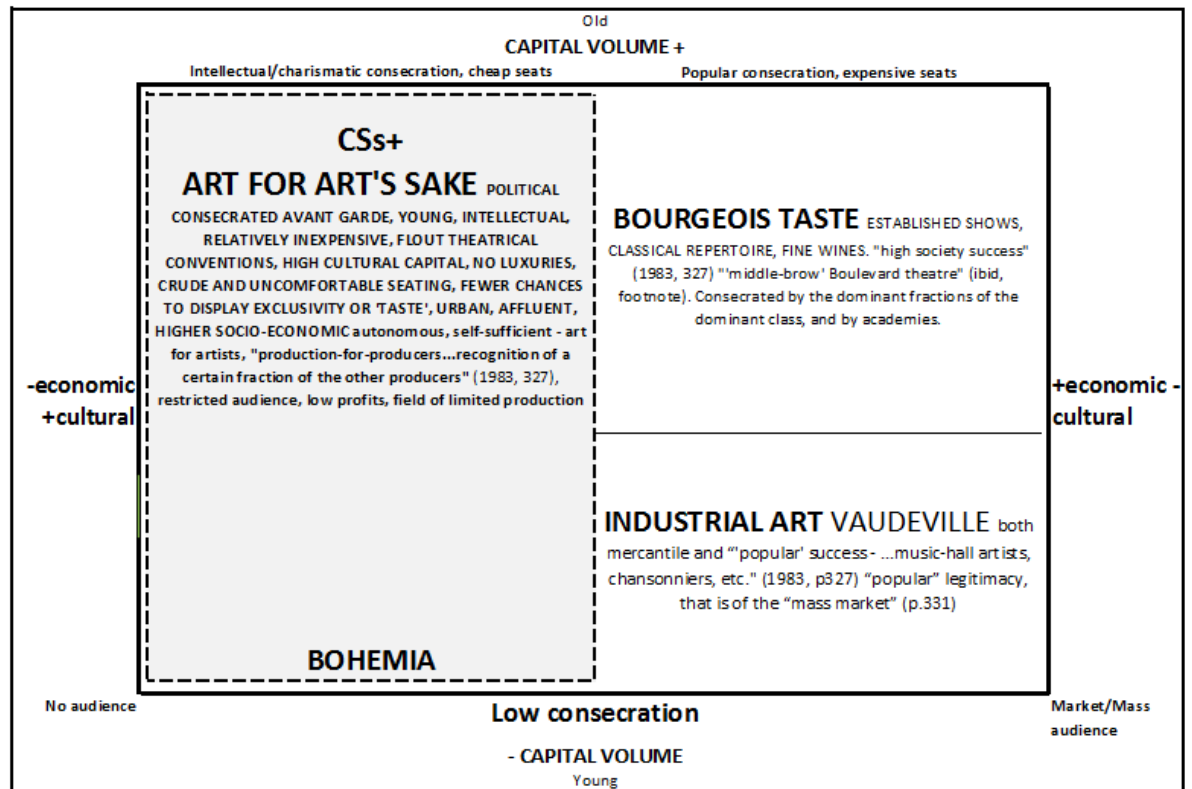


Figure 10: Bourdieu's three 'competing principles of legitimacy' (1983, p.331)

Again, the y axis shows overall volume of capital, with high total volume of capital at the top and low total volume of capital at the bottom. The x axis shows the inverse relationship of economic and cultural capital, with high cultural capital and low economic capital on the left and high economic and low cultural capital on the right. Contained within the quadrants are some of the words and phrases used by Bourdieu and others to describe cultural agents and particularly theatres and audiences.

Adapted by the author from Bourdieu (1996 p.124) with reference to *The Political Space* (2010, p.455). Also drawing on Friedman's *The Comic Field* (2009 p.15) and Stewart (2012).

## Constructing and limiting the field

The object then is to understand and map the field of Liverpool theatre and theatregoing. In *Questions of Method* (1989b), Bourdieu posits a field as a 'general method, a mode' (p.28), and states that to understand where an agent is in a field, rather than collecting 'hard data' on the agents within the field, it is necessary to identify three markers. This involves identifying where the boundaries lie within the field; the indicators of 'specific capital'; and the "'bank" of specific capital' (1989b, p.28) that legitimises such capital. Once these indicators have been identified, Bourdieu suggests creating 'indexes of capital' which can be distributed to place agents in relative positions in the field. This makes it possible to understand the distributions of different capital in the field, to create the relational space which is the field, and so to explain and predict the agents' products and practices within the field.

It would be useful first to define the field, and separate it from adjacent fields. From the perspective of cultural production, Liverpool has long been known for a wealth of theatre activity at all levels, from large scale productions to small scale fringe companies and amateur and education provision. In theatre, Liverpool producers produce work to be presented in Liverpool, and work to be toured outside of Liverpool on a national and international basis, and theatre promoters bring in touring work from other places. This then is a large field, broad in scope and deserving of a whole study. Given the focus of this overall study is on a building-based theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, and its position in the field, building-based theatres are focused on here. Other venues where theatre may take place outside of dedicated theatre buildings – college theatres, youth theatres, schools, youth clubs, the street and other public spaces, and so on – contribute to the richness of Liverpool theatre and are acknowledged as part of the larger field of theatre production, as well as part of their own homologous subfields, but are not included here. Similarly, small scale touring theatres, community theatre groups and

amateur dramatic companies which make up a major part of production in Liverpool have not been discussed in themselves. However they provide a vibrant contribution to the field, and venues where they contribute to product and form part of programming (such as Unity Theatre, the Lantern and the Epstein) are discussed.

The following section further explores Bourdieu's indicators and applies them to the field of Liverpool theatre, starting by identifying the boundaries within the field. The building-based theatres making up the field are, in order of audience capacity, the Empire Theatre, the Echo Arena, the Royal Court, the Liverpool Playhouse, the Everyman, the Epstein Theatre, Unity Theatre and the Lantern Theatre Liverpool.

## **Part 1: Where the boundaries lie**

Bourdieu's method is to identify the 'boundaries', which are the various divisions and separations that characterise a field, indicating the varying amounts of cultural capital owned by actors within the field. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), a field should also be analysed by its power relationship with other fields. Thus it is useful to put the field of Liverpool theatre into the context of the larger field in which it sits, that of British theatre, to identify the boundaries it shares with the larger, homologous field. Given the number of venues, the range of boundaries and, in some case the blurring of boundaries, this makes a complex picture. Boundaries are summarised at the end of this section (Table 2).

### **The commercial and the not-for-profit sectors**

In many ways, the boundaries within the field of theatre described and referred to by Bourdieu in his analyses of French culture (2010; 1996) are recognisable in Britain today. Theatre is still seen to be organised around what Bourdieu called 'the same fundamental opposition' (1996, p.161) of its economic models. In British theatre, that is the opposite poles of the commercial

and the not-for-profit sectors (often referred to as the 'subsidised sector', although not all not-for-profit theatres are in fact subsidised). According to Cogo-Fawcett, Lead Adviser of Arts Council England Touring, commercial theatre in Britain is 'motivated by pecuniary motives and by the desire to create profit' and subsidised theatre 'founded more on the philanthropic principle that the primary purpose of art is to improve man's understanding of himself and his fellows' (2003, p.5). This binary of a profit motive versus 'arts for art's sake' is significant in Bourdieu's account of a field in which agents such as theatres hold differing amounts of capital, where cultural capital and economic capital are gained in inverse proportions at each other's expense (1983), and where the not-for-profit sector dominates the accrual of cultural capital.

At least notionally disrupting this binary of commercial versus not-for-profit in British theatre today though is an increasing interest in breaking down those boundaries, with some theatres working together across this divide. This is partly driven by high profile successful transfers to the West End of subsidised shows such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Les Misérables* and more recently the National Theatre's *War Horse*, as well as less-heralded transfers such as that of the subsidised Liverpool Everyman's *The Caretaker* and the Playhouse's *Ghost Stories*, both to the West End in 2009 and 2010 respectively. Co-productions are also part of this rupture, for instance *The Ladykillers* in 2011, co-produced at Liverpool Playhouse by commercial producer Fiery Angel. These mergers of interest are of course made more desirable by current economic pressures on both sides, on the one hand the injection of commercial cash making restricted funding go further for subsidised theatre, and on the other the ability to try out new work in a lower risk and critically less pressured regional environment being an attraction to commercial companies. Both parties can also gain from the prestige of working with the other, each gaining capital. It is also strategically encouraged and officially sanctioned, with ACE commissioning Cogo-Fawcett's *Relationships between subsidised and commercial theatre* (2003) which gives a blueprint for coproduction between the sectors. The commissioning of Cogo-Fawcett's report,

alongside debate about the relationship between the subsidised and commercial in the arts and theatre press (Gardner, 2014; Shenton, 2015), suggests that this binary opposition is alive and well, at least in the minds of the Arts Council England and the major critics who consecrate the work and the sectors. This then is the first boundary: that between the commercial and the not-for-profit or subsidised venues.

### **Local authority venues**

This traditional division between commercial and not-for-profit omits an important sector of the field of British theatre. In his *Economic Impact Study of UK Theatre* (2004), Shellard recognises a third category, that of local authority-run or -owned theatre venues. He gives no information about how significant this sector is, and information from elsewhere is old or incomplete, although it suggests a significant sector in both size and subsidy. In 1991 for instance, the Audit Commission claimed that 'local authorities provide and operate a majority of the theatres and concert halls outside London', and more recently Lost Arts, a coalition of arts sector unions formed to document governmental cuts to the arts, states that local authorities spend more than the Department of Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) on UK theatres (Gillett and N & E London Equity Branch, 2013) (although the figures it gives in illustration represent culture spending as a whole rather than spending on theatre specifically). Arts Development UK with the Arts Council of Wales (2014) have undertaken 11 annual surveys of local authority spending on the arts and most recently reported on cuts in subsidy and in personnel, but it doesn't comment specifically on the number of venues and whether or not this has diminished. The size of the local authority-run theatre sector is potentially still large then, albeit having been and continuing to be vulnerable to funding cuts given the discretionary nature of local authority arts funding and the commercial development of town centres. Despite or perhaps because of their



eclectic programming, council-run venues have been and remain a significant feature of the fields of British and Liverpool theatre, particularly from an audience perspective.

In identifying the boundaries, it could be argued that the sector of local authority-run theatre venues is a subsector of the subsidised sector rather than a sector in itself. This is not only because it is often subsidised directly or indirectly by the local authority, but also because the rationale for the local authority-run venue is often shared with the subsidised theatre sector, and indeed the not-for-profit sector in general; values such as artistic excellence, quality of life, and social cohesion according to the Audit Commission (1991, p.12). However, it is also true that the aims of such venues are sometimes in contrast to this; according to the same report, local authority venues can have economic drivers such as attracting tourists and inward investment. Further, the wide range of entertainments (beyond theatre) offered by local authority run venues, including 'popular entertainments such as pop concerts, comedians, Elvis Presley lookalike competitions, snooker tournaments and spiritualist evenings' (1991, p.12) make some of their work tangential to the field of British theatre, or more analogous to the commercial field.

Local authority run and owned venues then sit somewhere between the binary of the subsidised and not-for-profit. Such civic venues tend to have low volumes of capital as they have neither the imprimatur of the funder nor the heteronomous consecration of the profit motive; the eclectic nature of the programming of such venues and their use by amateur companies gives them low cultural capital. However this is a division that is much more apparent to those within the field of cultural production and those that consecrate the field, rather than to the theatregoer.

## **Commercial, not-for-profit and local authority venues in Liverpool**

In Liverpool, there is one commercial venue showing theatre as part of its repertoire. This is the Empire, currently run by the Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG), a major international theatre owner and producer. The Echo Arena, an arena-scale venue opened in 2008 as a flagship of Liverpool's Capital of Culture year, also acts as a commercial venture with the aim of making a profit. However, it is run by ACC Liverpool, a PLC whose parent company is Liverpool City Council, and its secondary concern according to its accounts (ACC Liverpool, 2015) is bringing financial benefit to the city. It is underwritten by the Council, so is effectively local authority funded when it runs a deficit.

There are five not-for-profit theatre venues in Liverpool: the Royal Court, the Playhouse and the Everyman (operating as the Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse), Unity Theatre, and The Lantern Theatre.

Alongside the Echo Arena, there is another Council venue in Liverpool. As seen in the last chapter, the then Corporation of Liverpool leased the Neptune Theatre in 1967 (Ackroyd, 1996, p.96) and ran it as a going concern, presenting mixed touring product, largely amateur drama and pop. In 2011, Liverpool City Council sought a management to run the venue. The contract was awarded to commercial operator Sound City, and the theatre's name changed to The Epstein Theatre in commemoration of Brian Epstein, erstwhile manager of the Beatles. The deal included reduced rent for the commercial operator, tapered over five years until the theatre became self-sufficient, i.e. able to operate on a commercial basis (SevenStreets, 2011). The Epstein is a partially subsidised council venue, operated by a commercial lessee.

As seen in the history, the Royal Court was a commercial venue born of private enterprise; became owned by a series of commercial managements; fell into council ownership; and then was quickly leased to a new series of commercial managements. The Royal Court now has a

complex ownership arrangement where its buildings are managed in trust but the theatre is operated by a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. See Table 2 for a summary of this and how the Royal Court compares to other theatres in the field.

## **The question of subsidy**

As mentioned above, the notion of the 'not-for-profit' is often elided with the subsidised, despite the fact that not all not-for-profit ventures are in fact subsidised. Further, commercial managements often receive funding, for instance capital funding for buildings, or revenue funding for ancillary activities such as education and community work.

In Liverpool, this last is true of the commercial Empire Theatre which has been funded for both its building and its education work. As discussed, the Echo Arena operates commercially but has losses underwritten by Liverpool City Council, so is in effect subsidised by the Council. At the other end of the spectrum, the not-for-profit Lantern Theatre is (as yet) unfunded.

However the highest consecration in terms of funding comes from Arts Council England, and particularly its National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status. The only building-based theatres in Liverpool with NPO status are the highly consecrated Everyman & Playhouse, and the Unity Theatre. The Everyman & Playhouse has recently received annual uplifts to its current level of £1.7m (Arts Council England, 2015b); for the last three years, Unity has been on standstill funding of just over a quarter of a million pounds (Arts Council England, 2015a).

The Royal Court has long been unfunded, and this has been a source of some dismay. However, in January 2016, the Royal Court announced that it had been successful in being awarded Arts Council funding for its building redevelopment, and expressed 'hope this will be the start of a long working relationship' with the Arts Council (in Jones, 2016).

## Receiving and producing houses

Another 'boundary' is the traditional division between producing houses and receiving houses, i.e. those that predominantly produce their own work and those that predominantly receive touring product and one-off events that are originated by external promoters or producers. This distinction continues to exist, but as with commercial versus not-for-profit houses, there has been some blurring of lines. Producing theatres today do not always just produce their own work, but also bring in some touring product, often as 'hires' (where the touring company or artiste hires the venue) to fill otherwise empty nights or weeks, to fill gaps in the producing theatre's programme and to maximise income, and to diversify the repertoire. Incoming product to these venues is often theatre, such as Filter Theatre's week-long run of *Macbeth* at the Everyman (Everyman & Playhouse, 2015), but also comedy, because it is easy to sell and because the format is ideal to fill one-night gaps (e.g. John Shuttleworth and Count Arthur Strong, both at the Playhouse in 2015). Conferences and sport can also fill the gaps; famously snooker and other sports at Sheffield Crucible, and in Liverpool, darts, boxing and bodybuilding competitions are an integral part of the repertoire at the Echo Arena.

Similarly, receiving houses whose *raison d'être* is to take in touring, occasionally produce their own work, especially during the lucrative Christmas period when pantomime can be profitable enough to cover more risky product. In Liverpool, the small scale subsidised Unity Theatre is a receiving house that almost exclusively takes in other promoters' product, but it produces its own pantomime or Christmas show in partnership with a theatre training scheme, and mounts the occasional production or co-production if it has the right project (this was notable in 2015 when Artistic Director Graeme Phillips, who retired after 35 years, mounted a production of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*). Blurring this boundary means that classifying programming and repertoire is not quite as easy as it perhaps was in Bourdieu's 1960s Paris with its houses

dedicated to particular forms and genres. Nonetheless, the producing houses in Liverpool are easily identified as the Everyman & Playhouse, and the Royal Court. The Empire, The Echo, the Epstein, Unity and the Lantern all primarily take in touring product; see Table 2 for a summary of this.

### **Repertoire and run cycle**

A final boundary in the cultural field is the one that defines the type of work presented, and the period of time over which it is presented, here called the 'run cycle'. As can be seen in Figure 10, Bourdieu made four distinctions about cultural work: more experimental Bohemian work; art for art's sake; *bourgeois* taste; and industrial art. This is linked with the 'run cycle', the ability (or need) to monetise quickly, or to allow work to develop over time.

Deciding what work is presented in a theatre is a strategy for distinction as well as an economic decision, and for many theatres a balancing act. For commercial entities at the dominant pole of the field, the emphasis is on making a profit quickly through attracting the largest audience. In the *bourgeois* fraction, and in the dominated fraction of 'art for art's sake', artistic policy and the aim of maximising cultural capital are the guiding principles, and experiment can sometimes be underwritten by subsidy.

### **The Empire and The Echo Arena: 'uncomplicated pleasure' and 'something for everyone'**

The Empire has a strategy of established work (*Mama Mia*, *Anything Goes*) sold at high prices with short runs. Most of its programme is 'popular', such as, in 2014-15, well-known and jukebox musicals (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Dirty Dancing*) supplemented by bands (Simple Minds), tribute bands (The Illegal Eagles), and comedy one-nighters (Dara Ó Briain). There is a nod to variety with illusionist Derren Brown, and family show *Sing-a-long-a-Frozen* which trades on the

current popularity of the Disney musical. However, it also programmes a limited amount of opera, such as Ellen Kent's *La Traviata*, and *Madam Butterfly*, sung in English. While in the past it had a deeper relationship with high culture, the current classical programming at the Empire is comparatively populist. Under the global commercial ownership of the Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG), the Empire has sacrificed much cultural capital to gain economic value, selling mostly populist work at high prices and product that is homogenous enough to work in all of ATG's 40 venues.

With its strapline of 'Something for Everyone', The Echo Arena takes in a range of product from sports through popular music to comedy. In the 2014-2015 season, it presented declining rock musical *Godspell*; mature (and branded) shows *Disney on Ice* and *CBeebies Live Justin & Friends*, and the more risky pantomime by Dave Kirby, whose brand has been established by a previous production in the same venue and several sell-outs at the Royal Court (he is co-author of *Brick up the Mersey Tunnels*). These are shows which are intended to monetise quickly in short runs, and which have minimal risk. In its programming, the Echo Arena is low in cultural capital but high in economic capital, scheduling popular shows and spectacle, and being able to command a premium in ticket prices to meet 'mercantile' ends. This places the Echo Arena firmly in the mercantile and populist fraction of the field.

### **The Everyman Playhouse: legitimate theatre**

The repertoire at the Playhouse in many ways is startlingly similar to Bourdieu's boulevard theatre, showing sex comedies such as Feydeau's *Sex and the Three Day Week* and modern French farce *Boeing Boeing*. There are also established shows that include 'Liverpool classics' like Russell's *Educating Rita* which has been presented several times at the Playhouse over the last 20 years. The Playhouse does produce work that has the potential to be more challenging; *The Hudsucker Proxy* for instance takes on ideas about corporate greed, although it is seen

through the lens of a romantic comedy and is an adaptation of the Coen Brothers film; and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* takes on the forbidden relationship between a Jewish boy interred in a concentration camp and the son of a guard, after a successful film and book. More challenging ideas then have already been diluted and are refracted to make them more attractive. At the Playhouse, theatre is more valorised and challenging than work than at the Empire, but it is not *avant-garde*.

Plays at the Everyman are sometimes more challenging, with regular Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*), and Arthur Miller's *The Hook* about the politics of 1950s' America. There is also new writing; the 2014-15 season presented *Bright Phoenix* by Jeff Young, a play that tackled the very current topic of the selling off of Liverpool's assets. Like plays at the Royal Court, *Bright Phoenix* was set in Liverpool, but in the dark underbelly of a dystopian city, and it played with form and storytelling in a challenge to the audience to love its underclass. This follows a tradition that has included *Unprotected*, a verbatim play about a proposed 'safe zone' for sex workers in Liverpool, and, as will be seen, can be traced back to the Everyman of the 1970s. While the Everyman straddles the line of *avant-garde* with its new writing, the remainder of the programme is relatively safe and the work lacks the formal experimentation which Bourdieu suggests characterises the *avant-garde*.

### **Lantern and Unity: experimental work, short runs**

The Lantern Theatre is a relatively new theatre that hires itself out for music, theatre and comedy; its programme is interspersed with short run music and comedy, predominantly for one night. It encourages work at the introduction stage of its cycle, for instance through its *Shiny New Theatre Festival* which showcases pre-Edinburgh Fringe performances. Theatre work is consequently varied and often experimental. It provides a home for local companies on tour, for instance *Dracula* by Liverpool Network, a left wing theatre company and successor to Liverpool

Left Theatre. It seems to be clear about its own position in the field, describing its work as 'bohemian contemporaneity' (Lantern Theatre Liverpool, 2015).

Unity has introduced both work and companies that have grown and matured in the market, and indeed outgrown Unity. These are companies like Told By An Idiot, Improbable, Volcano, and Lumiere and Son, many of which have become established and valorised in the wider theatre field. Unity describes its repertoire as 'challenging, innovative, risky and unusual' (Unity Theatre, 2014). Plays are often produced at the producer's expense, analogous to the economic model of poetry according to Bourdieu (1983, p.332). Co-productions and professional work brought in are often pioneering, obscure and potentially difficult, such as Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Many practitioners at Unity cite their training at the *École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq* in Paris or with other leaders of the *avant-garde* such as Cunningham, Gaulier or Pagnieux. Unity has pioneered subject matter that was for many years not seen in theatres, championing work on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender themes that have led to ground-breaking festivals *Queer Up North* and *Homotopia*. More recently, Unity has also showcased political theatre, in May 2015 holding a *U-DECIDE* week of political performance to coincide with the General Election. In 2002, *The Guardian's* Alfred Hickling described Unity as 'the most ambitious theatre in Liverpool'. This is production 'entirely turned towards the future' (Bourdieu, 1996, p.143), and places Unity Theatre in the 'art for art's sake', dominated fraction of the field of Liverpool theatre.

### **Epstein: council-eclectic**

In contrast to the other theatres in the field, the Epstein has no particular pattern of run length, nor of the stage in the product life cycle of work it presents. This is partly because many if not all of its theatre shows are 'hires', where a producing company, amateur or professional, touring or locally-based, hires the venue for as long as it can afford. Despite being run by a commercial



management, current programming at the Epstein remains council-eclectic, perhaps as it struggles to find its position in the field. Shows in 2014-15 include the *Martini Lounge Burlesque and Variety Show*; children's show *The Tiger who Came to Tea*; stand-up comedy (Simon Amstell); music artists (Julian Cope and Rumer); *An Evening with Red and Blue Legends* ('a night of opinions, banter and questions from the audience' (Epstein Theatre, 2015) with representatives of Liverpool and Everton football clubs); and 'Liverpool's Easter Panto' *Beauty and the Beast*. With its low volumes of cultural and economic capital, despite its commercial management the Epstein continues to fulfil the function of a civic venue in the field of Liverpool theatre.

### **Royal Court: 'a real Liverpool theatre experience'**

Repertoire at the Royal Court is much more homogenous than at any of its rivals in the field of Liverpool theatre. This is partly because most shows are home produced, but the Royal Court is also aiming for a particular distinction in its quadrant of the field. Its website proclaims:

With no funding the theatre produces eight long running plays every year, mostly comedies and musicals. The shows have a Liverpool theme with largely Liverpool cast and crew. [...] If you want a real Liverpool theatre experience and, most importantly, a brilliant night out then do what more and more Liverpudlians are doing. Get down to The Court! (Royal Court Theatre, 2015b).

The 'unique' character of Liverpool and its audience is continually emphasised: The Royal Court has 'developed a unique style of theatre for Liverpool audiences...produced in Liverpool, starring Liverpool actors, written by Liverpool writers...' (Royal Court Theatre, 2015b). In addition to what online blog *What's On Stage* describes as 'Liverpool classics' (Russell and occasionally Bleasdale), plays are either locally commissioned or extant comedies adapted to fit local

topography. Protagonists are working class and the subject matter is their workplace; low-skilled, blue collar occupations such as taxi driving (*Night Collar*), cleaning (*Dirty Dusting*), council workers (*Council Depot Blues*), shop assistants (*A Fistful of Collars*) or beauty technicians (*The Salon*). The mise-en-scène is the workplace or the night out (the bingo or the club); the design aims for cultural verisimilitude. Sets are cheap and participation is favoured over spectacle. It is seeing Liverpool performed on stage that is the real draw; this relationship between the Royal Court and 'Scouseness' is discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

Given the workplace settings, there is potential for these plays to be about subversion, about revealing inner psychological truths, about exposing the nature of society to the audience, about education and politicisation. However, they tend to be happy with the cheap laugh over the more deeply moving experience. *The Guardian's* critic Hickling (2009a) says the plays are 'too formulaic, the characterisation baldly stereotypical, and much of the humour wouldn't be out of place in the crudest standup [sic] routine'. The Royal Court's programme has low consecration from valorised critics and the theatre holds low cultural capital, placing it in the 'industrial art', mercantile quadrant.

These boundaries taken together can be summarised in a diagram (Table 2, overleaf).

	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Run by</b>	<b>Largest funder</b>	<b>Receiving producing</b>	<b>Repertoire</b>
<b>Empire</b>	Building: Liverpool City Council, leased to Empire Trust	Ambassador Theatre Group	Capital funding, ancillary activities	Receiving	Mercantile, popular
<b>Echo Arena</b>	Liverpool City Council	ACC Liverpool, PLC subsidiary of LCC	Underwritten by local authority	Receiving	Mercantile, popular
<b>Everyman &amp; Playhouse</b>	The Liverpool and Merseyside Theatres Trust Ltd	Not-for-profit board (Ltd., charity)	ACE NPO	Producing	Bourgeois taste
<b>Epstein</b>	Liverpool City Council	Liverpool Sound City	Local authority support	Receiving	Mercantile, popular
<b>Royal Court</b>	Building: Trust	Not-for-profit board (Ltd.)	Recent capital funding	Producing	Mercantile, popular
<b>Lantern</b>	Community Interest Company	Partnership	Unfunded	Receiving	Bohemian
<b>Unity</b>	Unity Theatre, a Ltd charity	Not-for-profit board	ACE NPO	Receiving	Art for art's sake

*Table 2: Summary of the various 'boundaries' in the field of Liverpool theatre.*

## Part 2: Indicators of 'specific capital'

Alongside boundaries, Bourdieu's method of analysing a field includes identifying the indicators of 'specific capital'. These are 'those things which are at stake in the field [...that...] constitute instruments, weapons, to win the ongoing struggle that takes place in the field – including the struggle over what instruments may be used to dominate in it' (1989b, p.28).

What then is at stake in the field of theatre, and what 'instruments and weapons' are used? In *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods*, Bourdieu states that the only legitimate aim for an artist or specifically a theatre manager (1980, p.262) is to make a name for oneself, thereby increasing the ability to increase economic capital. Reputation and standing (which can be compared to recognition in the scientific field discussed by Bourdieu, 1990a) are in themselves important weapons that can be mobilised to gain capital in the field. At the most basic for a building-based theatre, being known as a locus of theatrical experience and for producing work in the field of theatre is a prerequisite for making theatre happen (Wiles and Dymkowski, 2012, p.173), as it is essential to attracting an audience. Beyond that, the particular sort of reputation (and in whose mind the reputation resides) depends on and is specific to the internal logic of the field itself. So a reputation for a particular style of presentation, for a particular genre of theatre, for the ability to sell out the house, or for the ability to challenge the established order, would be a useful weapon only in a field in which it was valued.

To understand the field of cultural production, Bourdieu suggests:

a simple model taking into account [...] the properties of the different arts and the different genres considered as economic enterprises (price of the product, size of the audience and length of the economic cycle) [...] together with the value of the recognition implied in the act of consumption [where the latter is indicated by] the size of the audience and its social quality (1983, p.331).

These 'properties', such as genre, price, and audience 'social quality', are bound up in cultural and economic capital, which themselves exist in inverse proportions in this field. Identifying these properties and discovering how they are represented in the world of theatre is the first step in determining distributions of capital within the field, and ultimately the relative positions of Liverpool theatres within their field.

### **Price of product and size of audience**

While Bourdieu suggests it is unnecessary to collect 'hard data', such information (unit price and audience capacity) is these days readily available on theatres' websites and it would seem perverse not to use it. Data was therefore collected on ticket prices for each theatre in the sample for two shows, the 2014-15 Christmas show and the show on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2015, or the soonest one thereafter. This was not possible for venues where theatre programming is sporadic. The Epstein was showing *The Dreamboys* (a male stripper show) on the date in question, so the next theatre date was chosen; similarly, the Everyman was showing a youth theatre production so its next in-house production was selected. The highest ticket price for theatre during the season was also plotted.

For most venues, relative ticket prices are consistent between the Christmas show and the theatre show (Table 3). Ticket prices range between £8 for the lowest priced ticket at small scale Unity Theatre and £55 for the large scale Empire. The Empire and the Echo Arena consistently command the highest prices and the Lantern and Unity the lowest. This puts the Empire and the Echo Arena in the dominant quadrant of the field with high economic capital, and the Unity and Lantern Theatre in the dominated quadrant.

	<b>Xmas show</b>	<b>Price range Xmas</b>	<b>Highest Xmas</b>	<b>Next theatre show</b>	<b>Price range Theatre</b>	<b>Highest for theatre</b>
<b>Empire</b>	<i>Aladdin</i>	£10.00-30.00	£30.00	<i>Mamma Mia</i>	£10.00-55.00	£55.00
<b>Echo Arena</b>	<i>Dreaming of a Barry White Christmas</i>	£20.75-25.00	£25.00	<i>Disney on Ice</i>	£15.40-43.45	£43.45
<b>Playhouse</b>	<i>Sex and the Three Day Week</i>	£12.00-25.00	£25.00	<i>Educating Rita</i>	£15.00-25.00	£25.00
<b>Epstein</b>	<i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i>	£12.50-18.50	£18.50	<i>Twopence to Cross The Mersey</i>	£24.75	£24.75
<b>Everyman</b>	<i>Little Red Riding Hood rock 'n' roll panto</i>	£12.00-26.00	£26.00	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	£16-20	£20.00
<b>Royal Court</b>	<i>Scouse of the Antarctic</i>	£13.00-16.00	£16.00	<i>Canoeing For Beginners</i>	£20.00	£20.00
<b>Lantern</b>	<i>Tommy Cooper Show</i>	£8.50-£10.50	£10.50	<i>Broken Biscuits</i>	£8.50-£10.50	£10.50
<b>Unity</b>	<i>Rumpelstilskin</i>	£8.00-12.00	£12.00	<i>Fiction</i>	£8.00	£8.00

*Table 3: Price differentials across Liverpool theatres*

*The table shows prices first for the Christmas show and then for a theatre show. The Empire and the Echo Arena consistently command the highest prices and the Lantern and Unity the lowest. The large scale theatres also have the widest range of ticket prices. All information is taken from theatres' individual websites.*

Data on theatre capacities were also collected. For the multi-space Echo Arena, the Auditorium was selected as this is where theatre shows are staged. Unity has two spaces and as both of these are used for theatre and are programmed together, capacities for each are mentioned. Capacities were plotted against highest ticket price for a theatre show in each venue (Table 4).

For the highest priced tickets at each venue, prices are largely consistent with scale, with the largest capacity venues commanding the highest prices and the smallest venues commanding the lowest prices. This is consistent with Bourdieu's description of the dominant and dominated

fractions, in which the dominant fractions with high economic capital are the large scale producers (Empire, Echo Arena), and the dominated fraction with low economic capital are the small scale producers (Unity, Lantern). The exception is the Royal Court, a relatively large scale producer, whose ticket prices are consistent with the lower end of the mid-scale producers. This is perhaps because it is attempting to distinguish itself from other theatres by targeting people with less economic capital through a low price strategy, and may in itself be viewed as a subversive strategy for gaining a particular position in the field. The largest range of prices, from low to high, is also found at the larger theatres, reflecting the different seating areas in the larger auditoria, but also suggesting a target of a wide range of social groups.

	Scale	Capacity	Highest ticket price
<b>Empire</b>	Large	2,365	£55.00
<b>Echo Arena</b>	Large	1,350	£43.45
<b>Royal Court</b>	Mid	1,186	£20.00
<b>Playhouse</b>	Mid	760	£24.75
<b>Everyman</b>	Mid	400	£20.00
<b>Epstein</b>	Mid	380	£20.00
<b>Unity</b>	Small	150/88	£10.50
<b>Lantern</b>	Studio	85	£8.00

*Table 4: Audience capacity across Liverpool theatres, against highest ticket price*

*For the most part, ticket prices are consistent with scale, with the largest venues commanding the highest prices. The exception is the Royal Court which charges less than would be expected for its capacity, perhaps relating to its target market with lower economic capital. All figures are taken from individual theatres' websites.*

It is interesting to see that agents within the field of Liverpool theatre in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century conform to Bourdieu's observations about the cultural field in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in terms of the relationship between scale and price. This could be viewed as an

obvious or inevitable relationship, with larger theatres charging higher prices, relating to higher costs of production and/or a bigger 'offer'. However, it could be argued that the 'field of limited production' offers a high risk, bespoke product with limited availability due to scale and length of run. In the wider economy, such products are often sold at a premium, but in the cultural field, the price of these products in the small-scale, 'arts for art's sake' quadrant is low. However it could also be argued that the price of these products is kept artificially low by subsidy.

### **Audience 'social quality'**

Bourdieu also specifically connects audience size with what he calls 'social quality', stating: 'the size of the audience (which implies its social quality) undoubtedly constitutes the surest and clearest indicator of the position occupied in the field' (1996, p.218). This inverse relationship, where a large audience suggests a 'lower' social quality, is perhaps most intuitive when the literary field is considered, where 'bestsellers' can be seen as inferior precisely because they are bestsellers. Applying this indicator to the field of Liverpool theatre, audience size has been determined in terms of potential capacity of each theatre. Audience social quality, which should (according to Bourdieu) be in inverse proportion to the size of each theatre, is discussed below.

### **The Echo, the Empire and the Epstein: fragmented audiences**

Audiences at the receiving venues the Echo Arena and the Epstein are difficult to categorise due to the eclectic nature of the programming, which is much more of a series of individual shows targeted at specific audiences such as children, women, or football fans. Certainly some attenders at these (and to an extent all Liverpool theatres) are no doubt catholic in their taste, but it is still unlikely that those attending *The Dreamboys* at the Epstein are also those attending The Crosby Gilbert & Sullivan Society's *The Mikado* or *The Tiger who Came to Tea* at the same venue. Audiences at the Empire and Echo are Bourdieu's mass audiences, although the



relationship of class and theatre mentioned by Stewart and others (Grisolía et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2008; Scollen, 2008; McDonnell and Shellard, 2006; Millward Brown, 1991) suggests that these would not on the whole be working class mass audiences.

### **The Everyman Playhouse: 'well-educated professionals'**

According to a 'culture segments' exercise undertaken by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2012), 'The Everyman and Playhouse's audience is dominated by Essence, Expression and Stimulation' segments. While these are not intended to be socio-economic segments, they are described as 'well-educated professionals' (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2012, p.13), 'older adults with time to spare [with] established tastes [...in...] more traditional artforms' (p.9) and the 'highly culturally active' (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2013, n.p.). These seem to reflect class.

It is interesting that in Morris Hargreaves McIntyre's analysis, there is now little to choose between the Everyman and Playhouse audiences. Everyman audiences have in the past been younger and more radical, and, in the 1970s particularly, attracted working class people (Goorney and MacColl, 1986; Merkin, 2004). The current uniformity of the Everyman and Playhouse's audiences may be related to changes of artistic direction in the early '90s (this is discussed later in the chapter) or the current joint management of the theatres, which may have blurred the distinction for and between audiences.

### **Unity and Lantern: 'Young, well-educated city dwellers'**

In a call on its website for advertisers, Unity Theatre (2014) describes its audience members as 'young, well-educated city dwellers, maturing families and experienced professionals in successful careers (mosaic groups B, F & O)'. According to Experian (2009) B, F and O are, respectively, 'the UK's executive and managerial classes' (p.8), well-educated young couples (p.10), and 'young, professional, well educated people' (p.13). Many audience members at Unity

are in fact from the field of small-scale theatre production, being either theatre students at nearby colleges or involved in the small scale theatre scene that presents work at Unity. In this they correspond with Bourdieu's description of producers who produce for other producers in the 'self-sufficient world of "art for art's sake"' (1983, p.331). Typical audiences for the Unity Theatre then can be characterised as partially low in economic capital (because of their youth and student status) but high in cultural capital.

There is no data available on the audiences at the Lantern. However, its relationship to production (supporting many new and local shows) and its claim to 'bohemian contemporaneity' suggest similar audiences to the Unity.

### **The Royal Court: north Liverpool, new to theatre**

Socially, audiences at the Royal Court are much more homogenous than at the commercial venues reflecting a more homogenous repertoire, and in that sense resemble the much easier to categorise Playhouse, Everyman and Unity audiences. However, unlike those theatres with their more *bourgeois* audiences, as seen from its *Economic Impact Analysis* (2009), the Royal Court attracts less economically advantaged audience members, and those who have not attended theatre before. While the *Economic Impact Analysis* contains no other demographic information, by observation, audience members are mainly white, and include a broad mix of ages including groups of younger people for instance in hen parties and older people. Audiences at the Royal Court's *Variety Lunch* events tend to be older, presumably as retired people are able to attend daytime shows. The scale, capacity and 'social quality' of audience members is plotted in Table 5.

	Scale	Capacity	Quality
<b>Empire</b>	Large	2,365	Fragmented, mass audience
<b>Echo Arena</b>	Large	1,350	Fragmented, mass audience
<b>Royal Court</b>	Large	1,186	Lower socio-economic groups
<b>Playhouse</b>	Large	760	‘well-educated professionals’
<b>Everyman</b>	Mid	400	‘well-educated professionals’
<b>Epstein</b>	Mid	380	Fragmented
<b>Unity</b>	Small	150/88	Young, well-educated city dwellers
<b>Lantern</b>	Studio	85	Bohemian?

*Table 5: Audience capacity across Liverpool theatres, against ‘social quality’*

*For the most part, it shows an inverse relationship, where a smaller audience tends to be of a ‘higher’ social quality. All figures are taken from individual theatres’ websites.*

## The boundaries and indicators in summary

Identifying the boundaries within the field and the indicators of specific capital allows the relative positions of agents in the field to be deduced. This can be represented graphically in a field diagram, giving a synchronic view of the relational in the field of Liverpool theatregoing (Figure 11).

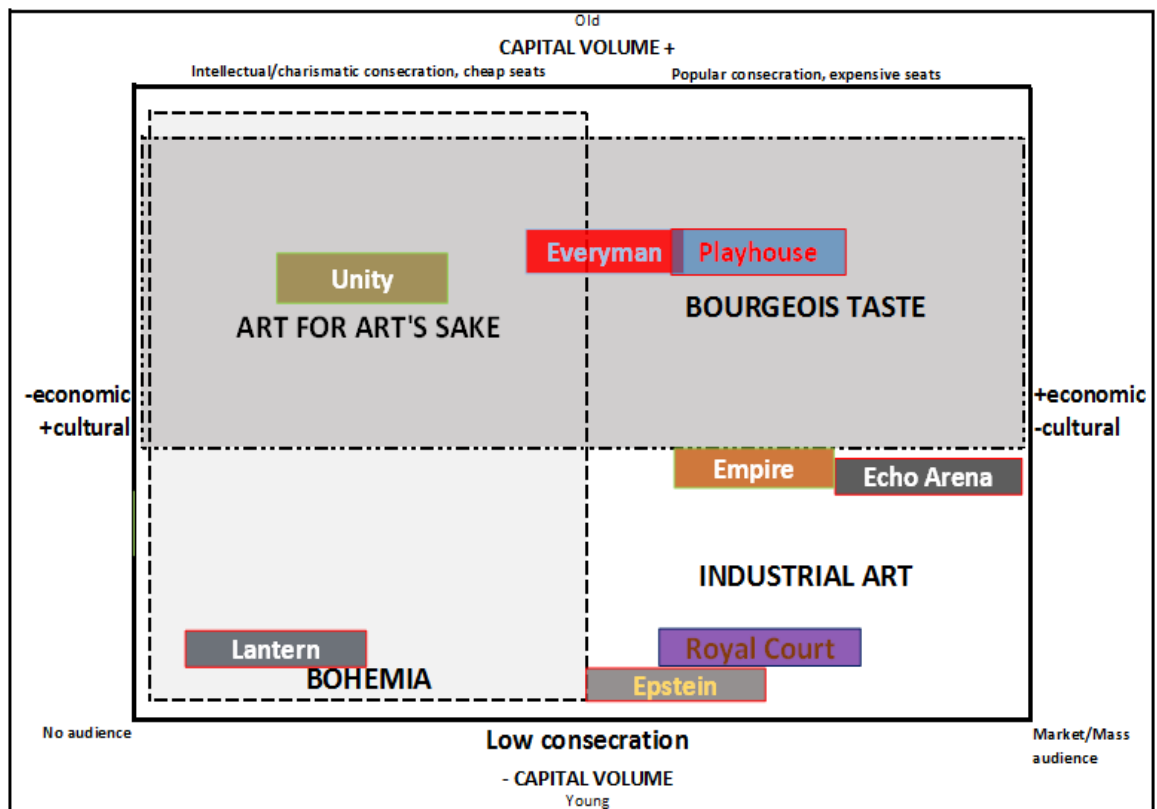


Figure 11: The Field of Liverpool Theatre

The diagram shows the relative positions of agents in the contemporary field of Liverpool theatre, constructed using Bourdieu's methods as discussed in this chapter.

As can be seen, the Unity is clearly in the art for art's sake dominated fraction with its cheap tickets, high consecration by funders and critics, and art produced by artists. The Lantern is also in the dominated fraction, but with its low consecration is in the Bohemian quadrant. The Everyman and Playhouse, with their high cultural capital and consecration, are in the *bourgeois* quadrant of the field. The Echo, Empire, Epstein and Royal Court are all in the 'industrial art' quadrant, competing for the 'popular legitimacy...of the mass market' (Bourdieu, 1983, p.331). This in part explains the Royal Court's very specific repertoire, which allows it to distinguish itself in a crowded quadrant of the field by targeting a very specific audience.

### **Part 3: The ‘Bank’ of Specific Capital**

Finally, Bourdieu suggests identifying the “bank’ of specific capital’ (1989b, p.28) that legitimises each agent’s capital. As has been seen, the consecration and legitimation of both funders and of critics is key to this ‘charismatic process of accumulation’ (1989b, p.28), and has been identified to an extent above. However, it is also useful to look at the behaviour of agents in the field as they accumulate capital and are consecrated in the field, banking their capital as they go.

#### **Behaviour in the field: Strategies of conservation or subversion**

In this chapter, the field of Liverpool theatre has so far been presented in a largely synchronic way, as a static field in snapshot, with players having already taken positions. While the field of cultural production is relatively stable according to Bourdieu (1983, p.328), it is still dynamic, and those positions have been fought for; as a space for struggle, occupants have needed to either maintain or advance their positions in the field. Those with a high volume of the appropriate capital need to adopt a conservation strategy to preserve that capital, and so have a vested interest in preserving the current rules of the game. Those with a low volume of capital either have to accept the rules and maximise that capital by pulling the flow away from the dominants in the field, or they must use strategies of subversion to change the rules of the game. The history of theatre in Liverpool is, like any other field, one of position takings, with agents adapting their strategies for distinction due to outside forces (theatre licensing, new technologies, social changes) and to changes within the field, especially exits from and entrances to that field. This has been seen in the previous chapter, where theatres vied for position as the field of Liverpool theatre (and indeed the larger social and cultural field) changed around it, and where the Royal Court fought to gain and maintain positions in the field – and sometimes lost the fight.

To gain a deeper understanding of the field of Liverpool theatre, it is important not only to understand the oppositions – between those theatres rich in cultural capital and those rich in economic capital, and between an ‘establishment and outsiders’ – but to understand the trajectories of players in the contemporary field who employ differing strategies of distinction in order to dominate the appropriate capital, and how, and by whom, they are valorised. These strategies, and how they are employed by agents in the field, cannot be viewed synchronically as they involve change over time, each agent in the field adopting differing strategies to stay in the game, and new entrants to the game changing the rules and forcing other plays to adopt new strategies for distinction. The last chapter gave a sense of this. However it perhaps gives a distorted impression as it focuses on a single agent’s trajectory; the Royal Court was not the prime banker of capitals nor the most disruptive force in the field of Liverpool Theatre, particularly over the last fifty years.

The Playhouse could be said to be the agent that is particularly emblematic of disruptiveness, going from the lowest point of the dominant fraction as the Star Concert Hall to repositioning itself as the ‘highbrow of the highbrow’ (Ackroyd, 1996, p.48) in the space of about sixty years. The most disruptive and transformational force in the field in more recent years has been the Everyman. The Everyman’s entrance into the field also illustrates very well the adoption of differing strategies of distinction within a changing and dynamic field, itself subject to the forces of a changing social and political world. It starts in the 1960s as this is when the Everyman entered the field and radically changed it, affecting not only the field itself but the *habitus* of the other agents within the field, both in Liverpool and beyond. It is useful to outline this here as it illustrates very well how fields operate and how capital is banked. It is also useful to trace this history due to the durable effects it has had on other agents in the field, in particular the Royal Court; as will be seen, the Royal Court wouldn’t be the theatre it is now without the effects of other agents in the field, and perhaps particularly the Everyman.

## History and capital

As Krebs (2014) points out in relation to the theatrical field, history is important to a field's formation. This has been seen in the previous chapter, where a variety of theatres vied for position, and entered and exited the field at different times, allowing more or less space for the Royal Court. The history of theatre in Liverpool is, like any other field, one of position takings, with agents adapting their strategies for distinction due to outside forces (theatre licensing, new technologies, social changes) and to changes within the field, especially exits from and entrances to that field.

The duration of an agent's history can be particularly important to consecration with cultural capital. Having a history in itself produces an institutional capital inherent, for instance, in phrases like 'the oldest producing theatre' about Liverpool Playhouse, and through their history and reputations, institutions such as theatres can be said to have 'embodied' cultural capital in their *habitus*. An attempt to enshrine such capital is seen in the Royal Court's brass plaque. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that reputation based on achieved capital, that is the effect of past capital accrual, may linger when symbolic actions that produced it (such as theatre productions) are no more. Speaking of Liverpool theatre to those outside Liverpool for instance can elicit a very positive response, with the sense of a rich and burgeoning experimental theatre scene that is almost certainly more true of the 1970s, '80s and '90s than of today, giving Liverpool theatre, and some Liverpool theatres in particular, a cachet, and endowing them with a banked cultural capital that they may no longer be generating.

## Enter the Everyman

In terms of institutional capital gained through a well-earned reputation for radicalism, experimentation and the *avant-garde*, the Everyman Theatre has very high cultural capital in Liverpool and beyond, consecrated by funders, critics and academics. Having been set up by

Martin Jenkins, Peter James and Terry Hands fresh from drama school in the 1960s, it was for many years a radical producing house. Situated in a rented black box auditorium that had once been a chapel, it utilised the old pews as a form of democratic communal seating on either side of an apron stage. At the outset, the space and the use of the building were in themselves experimental, but the very fact of setting up a new theatre, the notion that Liverpool could 'support another theatre offering a different programme from the long-established Playhouse' (Martin Jenkins in Merkin, 2004, p.8), and the aim of creating a new theatre audience according to Livermore, the Everyman's first Chairman (in Merkin, 2004, p.11) were in themselves radical and oppositional. At first much of the programme was neither, playing it safe by producing works on the school syllabus literally to pay the rent. The theatre though was keen to promote itself as not just children's theatre, presenting *The Caretaker* and *Hobson's Choice* during the evenings. There was also further experimentation with the idea of what (and where) a theatrical space could be, with *Murder in the Cathedral* taking place not only in a non-theatre setting but appositely in one of Liverpool's cathedrals. This was an attempt not only to play with the idea of form, but like the black box itself, a way of democratising theatre and taking it to the people.

By the start of the 1969 season then, the Everyman had gained a reputation for 'putting on little known and experimental plays' (*Liverpool Echo*, 1969, quoted in Merkin 2004, p.55) in new ways and in unconventional spaces. Prices were low but so was attendance; the more challenging work was not easy to monetise. Prestige was low although there was the consecration of some positive press, both for the repertoire and the chutzpah of the venture. The Everyman possessed little economic capital and had purposefully positioned itself in the dominated fraction of the field.

This was in stark contrast to the Playhouse. Despite humble beginnings at the lowest point of the dominant fraction of the field, the Playhouse stepped into the void left by the likes of the



New Theatre Royal and the many theatres that had closed in the early 1900s, and by the 1960s had become the established theatre of the city. Its aspirations of a more experimental repertoire based on the new repertory theatre quickly became very safe (Kershaw, 2004), producing 'a wide range of plays, but excluding *avant-garde* productions which were considered to be a financial risk' (Ackroyd, 1996, p.51). As the Everyman opened, the Playhouse's repertoire was a very old-fashioned season of Pinero and Coward, enlivened only by Behan. The following seasons were pretty similar, with Bill Naughton and Edward Bond causing a ripple in the otherwise quiet pond of Shakespeare, Arnold Ridley, and a staged version of Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Holiday*. The Playhouse did produce plays that had been ground breaking like *Zoo Story* and *The Crucible*, but while they were not yet the classics they were to become, they no longer had the shock of the new.

In the 1970s, the Everyman made a further stride into the left of the field, introducing new, risky, political theatre. Artistic Director Alan Dossor commissioned and presented new play after new play, challenging the audience and often playing to low houses. Many of these works reflected a leftist ideology, but also a playfulness of form, and in content mirrored back to the city what was happening within it. 'Merseybeat' poet Roger McGough describes the content at the time as 'proletarian, socially conscious stuff' (Wiegand, 2014). New versions of Brecht were commissioned, resulting in scenes in 'a Liverpool home' and 'a suburban living room' (Merkin, 2004, p.70). Dossor's strategy went beyond reflecting local interest or cheap parochialism, and reached into the politic of the city; *The Braddocks' Time* (1970) was 'the first documentary musical [...and...] used a boxing ring to tell the story of Bessie Braddock' (in LJM, 2006a); Braddock was the much loved MP known locally as 'Our Bessie' (BBC, 2014a). Everyman actor Jonathan Pryce recalled that 'As soon as any local issue or topical scandal blew up, Alan Dossor would commission a play about it' (Hickling, 2009b). Dossor's commitment was to the politics of place, and to telling the ordinary man's, and often woman's, story. However, at least at first, this

got little traction with a Liverpool audience 'ultra-conservative in its theatrical tastes' (Reynolds, 1968, cited in Merkin, 2004, p.46).

It is notable that writer and socialist John McGrath saw *The Braddocks' Time* at the Everyman and understood Dossor's project and asked to be involved:

I know what you're trying to do and I want to do the same kind of thing. The advantage that I've got is that I'm from here. I don't mean that I want to write a play for you, I'd like to work with you for at least two years (McGrath, quoted in Merkin 2004, p.69).

This resulted in a collaboration in which McGrath 'cooperated closely with Alan Dossor [sic] [...] on the shaping of community-style theatre that would attract working-class audiences, rather than exclude them "on grounds of education, wealth and class"' (Horvat and McGrath, 2001). McGrath's *Soft or a Girl* was one product of this relationship, with the theatre, the city and with Dossor, and it succeeded in filling the seats to the degree its run was extended. McGrath brought populism to the political theatre at the Everyman, increasing its economic capital both in terms of 'bums on seats' and resultant income, but also in terms of critical consecration.

There were various signs of this commitment to local working class lives and politics, and the audience seemed to be conscious of them. In 1972, local paper the Mersey Mirror wrote of McGrath visiting the Fisher-Bendix factory in Kirkby, at this point under worker occupation to resist shutdown following the factory's purchase by Thorn-EMI (Jacobs, 2006). McGrath was asked by one of the workers:

are you the man who wrote *Soft or a Girl*? I've seen it three times, and a lot of the lads did too. We often go to the Everyman. It's great and you don't have to dress up or anything (quoted in Merkin, 2004, p.76).

Another property that signified the taking of the higher ground were the *avant-garde* nature of plays in content and form. In other words, rather than playing the existing theatres at their own game and competing under current rules, the Everyman of the late 1960s and 1970s used strategies of subversion not only to carve out its own space in the field, but ultimately to reconfigure the rules and to change the game. It built up reserves of cultural capital by challenging what counted as legitimate theatre, who were the legitimate actors, what counted as a legitimate theatre venue, and perhaps most importantly, who made up a legitimate – and reachable – theatre audience. It played with notions of authenticity, inviting the ‘real’ Liverpudlian into a more democratic space that was not remote, ‘posh’, or expensive, to hear a version of her/his own authentic voice – and often political struggle – being played out on stage. That the rules of the game had been changed was evident relatively quickly, with the Playhouse redeveloping its building in 1966 to include not only a modern part to its façade and interior, but also including a studio space in which more experimental work could be produced. It showed some intent in 1969 by opening the Studio, a ‘safe yet utterly daring space’ (Everyman & Playhouse, 2011). It launched with Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, a play famous for attacking middle-class mores. This looks braver than it is though; by then the play had perhaps lost some of its edge and ability to shock or challenge, being thirteen years old and coming ten years after the feature film. More significant was the change of programming in later years to include works that reflected Liverpool and its inhabitants on stage, mirroring the work of the Everyman. By the late 1970s, work by local writers such as Bleasdale and Morrison was appearing at the Playhouse, and in 1980, writers Russell, Bleasdale, Morrison and Bond (‘The Gang of Four’), took over the theatre (Merkin, 2012, p.98).

At the Everyman in the 1980s, radical directors like Ken Campbell and later Glen Walford continued the Everyman project by playing with form and continuing to experiment with ideas

of theatrical space. The Everyman Youth Theatre (EYT) provided its own form of radical alternative once a year, with adolescent boys in drag in the revue-style *Three Day Festival; Suffer the Children...*'s stylised restaging of the Toxteth riots (astonishingly one month after they had occurred); and later a tour of mining communities during the miners' strike with a play about miners' wives. The sense of opposition and of counter-culture coming from the theatre was further augmented and literally underlined by the Everyman Bistro, a cellar bar beneath the theatre, which was home to a rebellious assortment of demi-monde actors, musicians and poets, the rabble-rousing underage (and underfunded) drinkers of the Youth Theatre, and of teachers eating quiche.

However, the start of the 90s saw Artistic Director John Doyle's arrival from the Cheltenham Everyman and a much more restrained (and at times somewhat bleak) approach to theatre. There were radical departures (hosting black theatre company Talawa with an African version of the Oedipus myth and a subsequent co-production of *Anthony and Cleopatra*), but on the whole the subversive days were over. As actor Ruari Connaghan says about his time at the theatre:

By this stage the Everyman had lost that edgy-left wing atmosphere that had harnessed its reputation and had become something of a standard middle class British rep. The really exciting work was happening outside of the theatre or on its fringes where no-one was getting paid (quoted in Merkin, 2004, p.229).

The Everyman had become an 'established regional repertory theatre' (Merkin, 2004, p.229). This was perhaps in part because the field had been forced to shift again in the 1980s when a new player entered.

## **The challenge: Unity Theatre**

The space where Connaghan's 'really exciting work' was happening was in and around the Unity Theatre. Unity is just round the corner from the Everyman, in Hope Place, a small residential street off Hope Street. The building began life as a synagogue and was a photographic studio when it was taken over by Merseyside Unity Theatre, part of the nation-wide socialist Unity Theatre movement (Unity Theatre, 2015). At the beginning, its anarchic atmosphere, part art lab, part youth club, attracted local theatre makers, ex-youth theatre members, and students from surrounding college drama courses. Under Artistic Director Graeme Phillips, Unity lost its close association with left theatre in the minds of its audiences, although it remained left field.

Phillips adopted a three-part strategy in programming the Unity. He presented professional and emerging experimental work from outside Liverpool, concentrating particularly on physical theatre; he supported emergent new work from these natural constituencies of theatre makers and students; and he provided a space for local community work. The venue's small, intimate auditorium meant it could present and sometimes produce work at the very start of its product cycle and develop work from its earliest stages, for instance through rehearsed readings. Its audiences were the people who made the theatre, watching and learning from each other's work, forming new alliances and collaborations, learning their craft, and often volunteering to help with front of house, stage management, constructing props for the Christmas show, or just making coffee. In the years before the building's refurbishment and its growing professionalisation, the theatre was as much a socialising space for theatre makers and students, making it inclusive to those in the know, and of course cliquey and exclusive to those on the outside.

Encouraged both by Unity and by support organisations such as the Hope Street Project and the Theatre Resource Centre, and fuelled by youth theatre graduates and new theatre degree

courses, the number of small scale theatre companies expanded until there was reputedly more small scale theatre companies on Merseyside than anywhere outside London. Work was often edgy in form and content, with plays like Sex & Violence's *Hollywood* tackling child sex abuse, queer stage adaptations of classic films by company Hollywood TNT (for instance a drag production of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*), and physical theatre from emergent companies Loudmouth and Théâtre de Complicité.

The field of Liverpool theatre in the latter part of the twentieth century then seems to be a two-horse race for the prize of legitimacy between the Playhouse and the Everyman, with more *avant-garde* work presented by the Unity. It is true that during this time, the Royal Court and the then Neptune (now Epstein) seemed largely irrelevant to the field of Liverpool theatre. As seen in the last chapter, the Corporation of Liverpool was running the Neptune, and programming was council-eclectic, made up largely of amateur drama bolstered by pop acts. The Empire moved from ownership of highly valorised capital with ballet and opera to the more populist repertoire it has today. As seen in the last chapter, the Royal Court was largely run as a pop venue in a series of commercial leases, with some variety typical of a local authority venue. In this way they had effectively decided the game was not worth playing and had entered another field. The Royal Court was to re-enter the field in a significant way in 2005.

### **Royal Court: Under new management**

As seen in Chapter 3, the Rawhide Comedy Club made its home at the Royal Court in 2005. Following the success of Kirby and Alt's *Brick up the Mersey Tunnels*, the Royal Court was 'resurrect[ed] as a full time theatre, with a strong local following' under its current management of Gillian Miller and Kevin Fearon. Its distinction is based on local theatre for local people and its 'unique cabaret-style stalls seating, dinner offer and drinks before the show' (Royal Court Trust, 2015). On the one hand, it has pursued a populist strategy at the mercantile end of the field. It

could be argued though that the Royal Court has been just as subversive as Unity. While it has not trespassed into the arena of 'art for art's sake', it is in many ways the successor to the Everyman of the 1970s, producing populist theatre that draws on Liverpool mythology and sense of self, and aiming at a working class audience ironically no longer catered to by those agents at the left of the field. The Royal Court regularly utilises forms pioneered by the Everyman, such as the documentary musical and the rock 'n' roll panto, as well as works from the Everyman canon like *Lennon* and *Our Day Out*. It uses local writers writing about local themes, and local actors with local accents who are recognisable to a local audience. Its plays are set in workplaces and its characters do jobs its audience might do. It plays with form to the extent the fourth wall is broken and 'banter' is tolerated or even encouraged. John McGrath would certainly recognise its populism and Littlewood its directness, but both would perhaps mourn its lack of political commitment. They would both agree with Bourdieu, that over time the *avant-garde* has become the established, and what was once radical has been co-opted to other aims.

### **The banking of capitals: conclusion**

This recent history of the dynamic field of Liverpool theatre shows a strong flow of cultural capital from the established theatre towards the new, experimental and *avant-garde*. It demonstrates the subversive tactics that are – often unconsciously – pursued by new entrants to the field in order to gain existing capital, but also to change the rules of the game so that new versions of cultural capital can be accrued. It demonstrates the tactics of preservation and consolidation pursued by those agents already in possession of a high volume of capital; that is, agents can bank capital, for instance in the form of reputational capital, that they can trade on in the future, even where they no longer produce that capital.

The Everyman revolutionised Liverpool theatre. It was successful in changing the rules of the game. Its trajectory neatly illustrates Bourdieu's contention about agents in the field. As a new player with no reputation and no money, it could not be the player with the highest volume of capitals. It used a strategy of subversion to gain cultural capital, calling on a claim of authenticity, an authentic appeal to a 'real' audience of working class Liverpudlians. It caused a 'specific revolution that [changed] the stakes of the field' (Bourdieu, 1989b, p.32). The work was often valorised by audiences themselves, and later by funders and critics. It was further consecrated by writers like McGrath, who in effect consecrated his own project through books like *A Good Night Out* (1989). The Everyman staked the claim for the 'real'; authentic theatre in Liverpool was no longer seen as the legitimate, classical repertoire of the Playhouse, but as direct and politically subversive, playing with form, and allowing for playful participation. Its content incorporated popular music and working class vernacular and was based on a recognisable working class experience, often set in the workplace, and was played by working class actors with real Liverpool accents. To use the words Bourdieu used about Manet, the Everyman 'did not want to win according to the implicit stakes, or strategic goals, of the previous state of the field. [It] wanted to change the structure of the field, its principles of distribution, its *nomos*' (1989b, p.32). The Everyman was the home of working class theatre and working class audiences for at least a decade, occupying a specific social role and a specific space in the field of Liverpool theatre and having a profound and lasting effect on all of the theatres in the field. Its trace can be seen in the current Liverpool-centric programming at the Epstein, Echo Arena, Everyman Playhouse, and especially Royal Court, with its promotion of local writers and actors, its use of workplace settings, and its continuation of the 'tradition of local musical documentaries' (Merkin, in Wiles, 2012, p.98). It is curious that such work is largely lost in the new Everyman-Playhouse, and perhaps predictable that its populism has been uncoupled from its politics at today's Royal Court.



Coming after the Everyman, Unity theatre has been the agent in the field of Liverpool theatre with the subversive strategy, the agent who claims 'to be returning to the sources, the origin, the spirit, the authentic essence of the game, in opposition to the banalization and degradation which it has suffered' (Bourdieu, 1993, p.74). Like the Everyman, it entered the game with no economic capital and fought for its space. While the Everyman continued to build its overall volume of capital and move into the consecrated and economic quadrants, the Unity has drawn to it the cultural capital made available, building on its reputation for the *avant-garde* and the left field, and creeping into the space made available by the Everyman's move to the right. It remains to be seen how newcomer Liverpool Lantern Theatre will challenge the field, and especially this dominated fraction.

## Conclusion

Bourdieu's concept of field consisting of oppositional, inverse capitals are useful ways in which to understand the field of Liverpool theatre, both synchronically and diachronically. Bourdieu talks in great detail about the characteristics of some of the poles in the field and is very specific in his descriptions of the quadrants in the cultural field, as well as about the 'properties' of agents in the field and where they sit in relation to each other. Bourdieu's descriptors, while in many ways culturally specific to a time and a place, are recognisable in the field of Liverpool theatre, both now and historically. The *avant-garde* that Bourdieu discussed still exists, although what defines it has of course changed, with works transitioning from the *avant-garde* to *bourgeois* taste as Bourdieu suggested in his discussion of the temporalisation of the field of production (1996, pp.159-160). This is typified by many of the current shows at the Playhouse and to a lesser extent the Everyman.

The Royal Court is at the populist pole of the field, largely unconsecrated by either critics or funding, and has to struggle to maintain its position there given the competition from other

agents in its quadrant. It conserves its position by using a deliberate strategy of distinction from other agents in the field, through its distinctive auditorium and offer of food and drink, and through its repertoire. Like Unity and the Everyman before it, it is achieving this through subversion, through claiming a new legitimacy, one of authenticity and particular appeal to a particular, working class audience, through its deployment of Liverpool-ness, or more specifically 'Scouseness'. Its very distinct place in the field of Liverpool theatregoing values a particular theatregoing *habitus* and valorises and bestows particular forms of capital. The concepts of *habitus* and capital, and how they are employed at the Royal Court, Liverpool, are explored in turn in the following two chapters. The concept of Scouseness and its deployment as a strategy at the Royal Court is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 5. Feeling at home: *habitus* and the Theatre's physical and social space

...social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127).

The last chapter looked at the place of the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool in the field of Liverpool theatre, identifying its very particular, niche position in the field. This chapter posits that the *habitus* of audience members and the physical and social space of the Royal Court Theatre create a good 'fit' that enables a sense of being within a 'comfort zone' within that niche. The chapter starts by briefly examining the evidence for audience members feeling 'at home' in the theatre space of the Royal Court, Liverpool, and goes on to explore the *habitus* of

the attenders through their relationship with theatre and their preparation for the theatregoing event. It examines the Royal Court's place in the field from the perspective of the research participants, to understand the perspective of those who go – and don't go – to the Theatre. It then looks at the physical and social environments of the Royal Court, to understand the external environment which audience members, as social agents, need to navigate. It draws on the qualitative research (focus groups, interviews, and TripAdvisor reviews) undertaken for this study, introducing the research participants, as well as the series of field visits and thick descriptions of events attended in the 2013-14 season.

The Prologue (Chapter 1) demonstrated that the Royal Court is successful in attracting audience members from lower socio-economic groups, many of whom are attending the theatre for the first time (Royal Court, 2009), and moreover that the Royal Court is also successful in encouraging repeat attendance. This suggests audiences are enjoying what happens at the Theatre, but also that they feel comfortable there. This is supported by audience members who, in focus groups and interviews, speak very clearly about their level of comfort in this theatre, as in this animated and positive exchange between focus group members Lynne, Pat, Angie, and Glennis:

Lynne: I feel very comfortable in the Royal Court, it's like home, don't you?

Pat: Everyone's like friendly and

Angie: Home isn't

Glennis: Home from home

Angie: Yeah yeah

Pat: You have a laugh

Angie: I know it's sort of like

Glennis: Just a comfortable feeling.

Other audience members also use the language of 'home' about the Royal Court. For instance interviewee Joyce describes the Royal Court as 'just dead cosy'. This sense of home and of belonging is important to the Royal Court; it is repeated in an interview with a local newspaper by actor and Royal Court regular Eithne Browne: 'a woman stopped me to say "thank you, we love coming to the Royal Court, it's our place"' (Jones, 2009).

This sense of ownership is the antithesis of the 'icy solemnity' of *bourgeois* theatre that makes working class people (semi-)conscious of culture as a separating mechanism according to Bourdieu (2010, p.26). So what is it about the building and its environment that signals to so many first attenders that this is a space in which they would be welcome and indeed feel 'at home'? The exchange in the focus group quoted above suggests that the repertoire itself and 'having a laugh' are a part of this, and the relationship between comedy, the Royal Court and its audiences is discussed in the next chapter. However, other elements are mentioned by the research participants, including the building, the auditorium, the staff, the actors and the audience. These are discussed in detail below. However Bourdieu suggests that the link between these is the *habitus*, that is the durable disposition of the theatregoer, and its fit with the particular social world it encounters that makes social agents feel in their right element. Therefore it is useful to first examine the *habitus* of audience members, before examining the environment itself to see how this 'fit' happens.

## **Theatre attendance and *habitus***

Bourdieu described the *habitus* as 'embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history' (1990b, p.56). In other words, past experience is sublimated and

internalised so that preferences, dispositions and ways of behaving seem natural rather than the results of socialisation in a stratified society. Wacquant, building on Bourdieu's work, stated that 'the notion of habitus proposes that human agents are historical animals who carry within their bodies acquired sensibilities and categories that are the sedimented products of their past social experiences' (2011, p.82). *Habitus* then is embodied history, based on experiences within a field, and made up of the cultural capital collected in that and homologous fields, alongside capital already 'banked' (for instance capital inherited from the family or transmitted through education). In approaching this, it would be useful to examine the research participants' experience and conceptions of theatre and theatregoing. This will also serve as introductions to the research participants; a full list of participants with brief biographies is provided in *Appendix 4*.

Pat is an older woman, probably in her early sixties. While she went to pantomimes at the Royal Court and the Empire as a child, she did not go to the theatre at all as an adult and has only recently started going again as a part of the Community Choir. When asked about her experience of going to the theatre as a child fifty years earlier, her eyes shone when she spoke of it; the memory was internalised and durable. She described theatre as 'magical'. In the same group, and of a similar age, Jackie grew up in a block of flats near the Derby Cinema in Scotland Road, north Liverpool. She said she came from 'a musical family' which she credits with her childhood love of pantomime. She went to the cinema a lot which she talked about interchangeably with the theatre. Jackie talked in some detail about what she'd seen on stage as a child, not only describing her absorption and involvement in the performance but reliving it with physical gestures:

from a child, I've just loved pantomime, we, we went there a lot really, y'know at Christmas time, and erm I was only ever very, very tiny, well I'm still tiny, and y'know

when the things shoot down the back with all the words on? Well I used to be in RAPTURES, and I'd be, I'd be hysterical, even doing things with everybody, and me mum [imitates her] 'it's going to fall over, bring it down!' [laughter]. It was going to fall off [laughter]. And anything that was going on, I'd run out to grab it, [inaudible] the clown, or whoever it was, I'd go [gestures].

Like Pat's, Jackie's experience was vivid and the memory of the physicality and fun of the act was strong enough not only to be relived but to be performed for others fifty or so years later.

While not all participants in the research had attended theatre as children, most of those that had done so felt they were exceptions to the rule in their community, and that the event was a break from their own normal lives. Lynne is 63, and as a child went to a secondary modern, 'not a posh school'. She trained as a nurse and then a special needs teacher, and is now working with people with learning difficulties. Lynne spoke about her formative experience, where her teacher saved pupils' money to enable them to attend:

I had a teacher at school, the music teacher, who collected threepenny bits every Friday. If you were interested – if you weren't interested she didn't - but she collected threepenny bits every Friday, and then when we had enough money, she'd buy tickets for the gods<sup>5</sup> in every theatre in Liverpool, so by the time I was like ten, eleven, I'd been in every theatre, granted we were on the ceiling, y'know, but we'd been in every theatre, and, erm, she was my first introduction...she took us to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, or the operas, y'know, everything, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, every, every play, and it was, it was her that really gave me my love of theatre.

Lynne clearly saw her experience of theatre as exceptional in her neighbourhood.

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<sup>5</sup> 'the gods' were traditionally the cheapest seats in the theatre, so-called because they were nearer to heaven than to the stage

Edna, in her seventies, was the oldest research participant. She grew up as one of ten children in the poverty of north Liverpool in the 1930s. Edna would leave her home in Roscommon Street clutching a bag of carrot and turnip chunks which substituted for sweets – her mother used to say: ‘when you crunch it people will think you’re crunching sweets’. She would get the tram to the Shakespeare Theatre in Liverpool city centre to see ‘music hall I suppose, comedy, variety stuff’. Edna described being introduced to theatre as a child, this time by a family member:

I had this sister who was ten years older than I was, and she was in Fazakerley Open Air Hospital<sup>6</sup> for about three years as a kid because she had TB [tuberculosis] so she missed a lot of schooling and could appear not very bright but she wasn’t very educated, none of us were really, we lived in a very poor area, but she’d somehow and I don’t know how, she loved the theatre, it was a passion.

Edna sees her sister (and by extension, herself) as an exception, someone who, due to a lack of education, illness and poverty, would not be expected to have a love of theatre – although later on she expresses a catholic taste, to include Greek drama.

Lynne also sees herself and her family as exceptions in many ways, attuned to a taste for theatre despite where they came from. However, this is in contrast to the sense of wonder shown by Edna. Instead, Lynne explains this through her own and her family’s sense of distinction, a particular taste and discernment due to their particular intelligence and aesthetic appreciation. When Lynne was a child, her teacher ‘was interested enough to pick the ones out who were interested and nurture them’ – of whom she was one, and a significant one at that, due to her aesthetic appreciation. Lynne illustrates this with another story. She was selected for a special job after assembly each morning: the teachers ‘used to play a piece of classical music, and the ones who were interested, got to pick the music. And I used to pick all the music, because I was

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<sup>6</sup> Actually Fazakerley Open Air School, for children with tuberculosis and asthma



the one that was always interested in classical music'. For Lynne, this aesthetic sensibility has been inherited from her grandfather, who (according to Lynne) was always interested in what was going on at the theatre, and it was preserved and passed down, to her and then her children, providing them with durable and heritable distinct dispositions, which she utilises for distinction even now: 'Yeah, I've got a very subtle sense of humour...I've got an eldest daughter...she went to university and did literature, but she read Shakespeare when she was six'.

These participants mostly originated from the poorer areas of north Liverpool. They saw their childhood theatre attendance as exceptional, and contingent; they happened to have an aunt who got free tickets, or, like Edna, an older sister with an inexplicable love for theatre. There was a definite sense of theatre having been an elitist pastime that was not accessible to all. When asked why, many of these participants put this down to their poverty, which made tickets out of reach. Edna mentioned it was about 'class', but didn't elaborate further.

One of the interviewees, Angela, expressed this gulf between theatre and ordinary working class people's lives. Angela was sixty and had grown up in Kirkby, a satellite town in north Liverpool that is still without a theatre. She participated in school plays but didn't really attend theatre, although she was taken by school to films like *The Sound of Music*. She left school at fifteen and became a hairdresser. She says:

actors were very like posh, 'sweetie, darling' and you know...I don't think the regional accents were used very much then, and the only other thing we saw was the Old Time Musical Hall...they were Northern but they weren't, you know they did have an accent...it was like 'how can they afford to do that?' you know and erm, I think when I look back on my life, I perceived [theatre] to be a luxury for the chosen few.

Angela saw this class exclusion as historical, associating the elitism of theatre with an earlier hierarchical society that had since been culturally democratised. For Angela, while there are still hierarchies of taste and indeed price today (she gave the analogy of Marks and Spencer's café compared to McDonalds) everyone is now free to choose either or both depending on their personal preference and ability to pay. Interestingly, Angela sees her role as encouraging and 'educating' others, especially her clients at the hairdressers, to go to the theatre. She described verbally eradicating perceived 'barriers' (her word) such as price and anxieties about conventions such as dress codes.

In contrast, some members of the first focus group had had a much closer relationship with childhood theatregoing, having family members with their own relationships to theatre. Sarah is a teacher of about forty years old, who jokingly compares her theatregoing habit to addiction, describing it as having 'a theatre problem'. Her familial theatregoing was reinforced at school with trips to the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. She then joined an operatic society. Her theatregoing lapsed when she did an access course and went to university, and in recent years she has started attending again with friends from work. Sarah describes her early experience of theatregoing:

Well, I think my first theatre show, I was probably about five years of age and my mum had been a member of Birkenhead Operatic Society for years and years and years before she had children, and then she had her two children and then decided she was going back, and she took us to the Saturday matinee of *The Pyjama Game* at the Empire which was to go and see the show before she went back, so we were there with our booster cushions and your box of Matchmakers<sup>7</sup>. And then when she went back my dad used to take, take us every Saturday matinee for every show, and we'd

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<sup>7</sup> Matchmakers are a low-price boxed confectionery then branded by Nestle.

always have our Matchmakers, so that smell, of Matchmakers [murmurs of yeah from Karen], reminds me of the theatre all the time, and you know the train going underneath the Empire? [Yeah agrees Karen] and that would be part of, y'know, part of the trip, and listening out for the train and things. And then...I think when my dad was doing night shifts and things, my nan used to take me, and we used to go to St George's Hotel to the little restaurant, and go beforehand, so this is where the 'going to the theatre and going for dinner beforehand' problem started [laughs]...Yeah we used to get, you know the chicken drumsticks with the little chefs' hats on the end, and that would be a, y'know, and so I'd go with my nan and like me nan's friends so I was a grown up girl then, but I was still in primary school...And...we sort of carried on going on from there and I did English Lit. at school and we'd go down to Stratford and see Shakespeare and, y'know, whatever was on locally, and then when I was sixteen I joined the Operatic Society, and then I was in shows at the Empire.

Sarah's memories are also vivid and visceral, with tastes, sights, sounds and smells coming to the fore in her description. She is also conscious that these experiences set the pattern for future rituals around theatregoing. Her journey has been a steady development from her introduction to theatre by family as a child, and expanded and ratified through school.

Ursula, also a teacher from the Wirral around the same age as Sarah, had a similar familial introduction to theatre. A great aunt used to pass on free tickets for a matinee at the pantomime. It was a celebratory event, with her and her cousins having a party afterwards. Ursula still attends theatre, including a West End show once a year as 'a treat', although she points out that she finds ways to minimise the cost. For both of these participants, their social capital was central to their introduction to theatre, and the social nature of the event has provided happy memories, and led to a durable habit.

This was in contrast to the younger contributors to this research, where early exposure to theatre through participatory activities such as youth theatre and theatre access events played a more prominent part in their introduction to theatre than their families. This perhaps reflects the burgeoning community theatre movement of the 1960s and '70s, and later attempts to create greater community access to cultural institutions. Angie is in her twenties; for her, there was little family tradition of theatregoing:

Angie:           When I first went to a theatre I was about fifteen, it was an Open Day at the Playhouse, and we tried all the costumes on and took pictures, and my picture was actually in the paper

Maria:           Oh fantastic. You look very proud about that Angie

Angie:           Yeah, I was like [laughs] 'My God!' And then we kept going over to the theatre over there. With me nan, and me mum.

In Angie's case, family members were part of the reinforcement of cultural capital after its bestowal, which fell to a theatre institution, in a reversal of the usual way in which capital is transmitted according to Bourdieu. As it happened, Angie's mum, Karen, was in another focus group for this research. Karen is middle-aged, and looks after her own father, often staying overnight at his home, which makes socialising difficult. She also has a health condition, and is short of time and money. Growing up, Karen went to musicals (which she still prefers to drama and plays) because her mum was 'very musical' and went to see her friend appearing in an operatic society. However, Karen says she didn't take her kids to shows, so this cultural capital was not passed on as it was not valued. Karen does go to the theatre now but largely on sufferance, because her daughter Angie 'drags' her.

Susan is the youngest of all contributors, is a member of the Royal Court youth theatre and attends the Royal Court often. Her introduction to theatre was through education leading to participation:

I went in Year 4 [of school], I went the Empire to see *Starlight Express*, that was my first time at the theatre, and then erm, we went as a big group, like our class went, and we all enjoyed it, and then that's what got me into wanting to go [to] the theatre and whatever, and then it was about, about four or five years ago maybe, we went to go see *Cinderella*, erm, and then we done our...we do, we done shows in school and erm we done the *Access All Areas* [community project], which is a combination between the Royal Court and different schools, we done our show up on the main stage, and that's how I got into the youth theatre and so I've been going the theatre ever since then.

As would be expected from both Bourdieu's discussion of the transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010) and the contemporary empirical research discussed in Chapter 1, many focus group members had been introduced to the theatre by family members, with focus group participants mentioning mums, dads, sisters, aunts and a grandfather as pivotal in passing down cultural capital. Theatre was seen by many participants in terms of an event – a special occasion, a shared celebration with family members, and, looking back to childhood, the chance to go out late and in the dark; for some of these theatregoers, the memories of the special social event being shared, largely with family members, took precedence over what was on stage, although for some, the theatre of the event was still a visceral memory. School was significant, not just in passing down capital but in valorising it. For younger members in this sample, participatory community activities and open days were more important than family in transmitting cultural capital.

On the whole then, cultural capital in these focus groups has been transmitted largely as Bourdieu suggested, through the family and reinforced by education or formal participatory activities, with some reversal of this for younger participants. There was though an additional and unexpected dimension. Several older respondents suggested that they developed a socialised feel for theatregoing through participation in informal performance at home, through family members' 'entertaining'. This was not family members who were part of the adjacent field of cultural production, they were not professional or even amateur theatre makers, and nor were they owners of a sanctioned understanding of culture or the aesthetic appreciation of art which Bourdieu calls a 'pure gaze' (2010, p.23). Rather these were families and family members who performed for mutual enjoyment and entertainment. Pat, who found theatregoing so magical, describes her experience:

Well my dad used to play the piano and the ukulele and the banjo, couldn't read a word of music, but he used to play, and we had a big bay window in our house with curtains that came across like that, we used to have our own pantomimes and plays, we'd sing, y'know lots of songs and everything, loved it.

This and similar experiences were spontaneously volunteered by several older focus group members when asked about their early introduction to theatregoing, and in that sense they saw no particular separation between these domestic performances and going to a theatre space for a professional performance of a 'valorised' piece of theatre. This does not refute Bourdieu's conception of the inheritance of cultural capital through the family, but adds a very particular mechanism of transmitting capital through practical experience of creating and enjoying theatre within the home. This may be culturally specific, to the time and place in which these particular focus group members were growing up, that is Liverpool, England in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. The convivial sense of participation this evokes, and the porosity between boundaries (between

audience/performer, public/private and professional/amateur) may also go some way to explaining the convivial sense of participation and shared performance that characterises the working class culture found at the Royal Court, and which is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In his chapter *The Choice of the Necessary* (in *Distinction*, 2010, pp 373-397), Bourdieu suggests that the lack of value placed on 'legitimate culture' by working class people limits its discussion, and further that entering into such discussion would actually create a loss of social capital due to the social opprobrium gained through 'pretension', of being seen as wishing to distinguish oneself, which would ultimately be interpreted as a 'refusal or repudiation of the group' (2010, p.382). The familial relationship with theatre and performance revealed here, and especially with some of the group members with least economic capital, appeared very different. The experience of not only being able to talk about it at home but such discourse actually being encouraged, and indeed theatre being played out both for others' enjoyment and as a revisiting of a performance another family member has enjoyed, is then counter to Bourdieu's experience of working class people and legitimate culture.

There was in fact general agreement amongst members of both focus groups that they had not found 'social opprobrium' around theatregoing to be an issue either as children or adults. Of course this would not be an issue for people like Sarah who had a familial relationship with culture through an operatic society. Nor, at the other end of the spectrum, would it be an issue for those like Angela in Kirkby whose family had no occasion to discuss theatre as it was so distant from their lived experience. However opprobrium may have been expected with other participants who clearly felt that while they went to theatre on occasion, theatregoing was somehow unusual for people like them, or even elitist. Theatre and theatregoing were nonetheless sometimes part of the discourse in families, with theatre being treated as a special

occasion or even a catalyst for ad hoc performance. Contrary to Bourdieu's contention, in several cases such discussions actually occasioned a rise in social capital within this particular culture/social group as it had with Lynne, perhaps because of the social group's familial interest in theatre and performance, or even the wider culture of the community who enjoyed their own performances and did not distinguish between this and valorised theatre.

Conversely, it may also be that some contributors may be actively seeking to use the distinction lent by such capital as a separating mechanism themselves, to step out of their class, rather than having the positive desire for class identity and solidarity that Bourdieu suggests. Indeed, Lynne consistently indicated her distinction from her peer group, talking of her own special interest and discernment. On the other hand, it of course cannot be denied that there may have been unwillingness to discuss social opprobrium, especially for those within a focus group setting, and particularly where other members of the group disavow such an experience. It is also true that of those participants who are working class, they are unusual in their regular theatre attendance. The championing of theatre by individual family members and teachers, leading to their early embodiment of a *habitus* that was comfortable in the field of theatregoing, may be responsible for their presence at theatres in later life.

In summary, the act of going to the theatre appears, for these participants, to be already informed by the *habitus* of the theatregoer, the durable disposition based on their class position, informed both by their real lived experience of theatre as a theatregoer (if any), and their notion and received opinion of the symbolic concept of theatre. The working class participants in this research are unusual in attending the theatre. Beyond the published empirical evidence of class and theatregoing, their own experience tells them that their theatre attendance has been unusual, in their own lives and in the eyes of their communities. On the whole, they see their theatre experiences as special and fulfilling, and for some their childhood



experiences are not just internalised but still very vivid. Some participants are aware of the separating mechanism of theatre and theatregoing, although some see this as historical, as being part of a more stratified society that has now become more porous, at least as far as class being a barrier to attendance of different social spaces. Each *habitus* is of course individual, having been made up of different experiences embodied and internalised, but each has been informed by social class. It is with their individual *habitus*, the embodied, durable disposition made up of all of these experiences, that each audience member approaches theatregoing.

### **An audience prepares**

The experience of attending a show at a theatre then begins long before the lights go down. As well as an individual's *habitus*, there are all the 'cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event' (Bennett, 2005, p.139) and which make up the 'extrinsic' experience of theatre (Brown and Novak, 2007, p.17). This section deals with the 'preparations for performance' spectators make (Schechner, 2004, p. xviii) before they arrive at a venue.

As Zitner puts it, 'for television one merely turns a knob. The stage-play ritual begins with planning: for tickets, for transportation...for dinner, for clothing. It is a venture, a budget item, an occasion. It is also a ceremony, generating expectations, attitudes, behaviour' (1981, p.1). In his ethnographic research on motivations of theatregoers, Walmsley (2011, pp.12-13) discusses what he calls 'pre-liminal behaviour', rituals around and preparation for attendance, such as anticipation, strategies to maximise the escapism of the event such as meditation, and getting dressed up. Studies such as Brown and Novak's 2007 *Assessing the intrinsic impacts of a live performance* suggest that such behaviour has a use value, in that the greater the audience member's 'preparedness' for the theatrical event, the greater the potential for intrinsic impact, which 'will go beyond the level of pure entertainment to a level of mental, emotional and social

engagement' (p.22). So what preparatory behaviours do the research participants make before attending the Royal Court?

The approaches of research participants to prepare to attend theatre differed widely, and were related to theatregoers' economic and social circumstances, as well as their past experience and habits. Sarah tends to meet up with teacher colleagues for food (very much reflecting her early experience of pre-theatregoing at the St George's Hotel restaurant with its chef's-hat-wearing chicken drumsticks) and makes a night of it:

Most of the time I'll come straight from work, and we meet up and go for dinner, so there's like different people that I'll meet, and like this Friday evening a group of eleven of us from school who are going to see Guys and Dolls at the Floral [Pavilion] in New Brighton [in Merseyside] because one of the teachers we work with is in it. And, er, you know, we're going straight from school for dinner, and then to the theatre...We're going to Chimichanga [Mexican mid-range chain restaurant] at Marine Point [New Brighton, Wirral], so just a restaurant, bit of food. I mean, if I'm coming here [the Royal Court] we try to get the dinner tickets here, but if not go to Ask [Italian mid-range chain restaurant], if we're going to the Philharmonic [Hall] we go to Ego [Mediterranean mid-range restaurant] or the London Carriage Works [a quite expensive and upmarket 'modern British' restaurant; here she says something about the Prix Fixe menu].

Susan, the youngest focus group member, showed a real sense of excitement and anticipation when discussing her pre-theatre ritual:

so I go rushing from college, get changed, because I do dress up – we all promised, all of us from youth theatre, we go see shows, we're going to dress up – so, dress up, get me dad to bring me down. Erm, then we all meet up, we all come in, see the show,

then we'll probably go to McDonalds or somewhere, and then my dad will take me and me mate home.

Susan and her youth theatre friends seem particularly keen to establish a ritual as part of their identity as theatregoers, claiming a sort of pact. Both she and Sarah had a social preparation in common, one based around extending the social element of the event.

However, most participants didn't recognise the idea of preparation or pre-attendance ritual. Karen, who makes occasional theatre visits apparently to please her daughter Angie, fits these outings around caring for her ill father. Even for a special event like the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Karen had her tea at home, got the bus, saw the show and went home again. Her life, and that of her family, seemed particularly circumscribed by a lack of time and money.

Interviewee Joyce is in her late forties and returned to education as an adult after having a child, and is now an Education Officer in a museum. When asked about preparing for the theatre event, she looked blank, and answered 'It just doesn't enter my head, I just turn up and yeah...'. However, she did appreciate the social side of the ritual, and later in the interview seemed to demonstrate a wistfulness as she was excluded by circumstances, saying: 'If I was a theatregoer, you know, it's definitely one of those things if I had a few bob, I'd go. I'd have the drink, I'd go [to] the theatre, then I'd go out for a meal, 'cause I think it's a lovely night out thing to do'. It is also interesting that Joyce, who elsewhere in the interview talked about a range of theatres and theatre events, does not see herself as a 'theatregoer'.

Generally, there was not the same evidence of 'pre-liminal' anticipation or attempt to focus or prepare for the aesthetic element of the event as reported by Walmsley's participants (2013b), nor was there any attempt to prepare in a way that would prime these audience members for a deeper level of engagement, as in Brown and Novak's hypothesis (2007); this just didn't form part of anyone's reported routine. Pre-show activities tended to be practical (getting the bus) or

social; these participants either didn't prepare, or prepared for a social rather than an aesthetic event. This is perhaps because 'pure entertainment' is the aim of the event at the Royal Court rather than deeper engagement, there is a sense of attending a Royal Court show being a hedonistic experience consumed in the moment rather than one which is prepared for, and this perhaps is commensurate with the straightforward nature of the Royal Court's plays which neither require nor reward a great deal of spiritual or intellectual investment.

The one ritual that was discussed in some detail by participants however was getting dressed before the event, or at least gauging the appropriate dress. This was couched by many contributors much more in terms of anxiety than in the pleasurable anticipation Susan indicates above in reference to her pact to 'get dressed up'. Interviewee Angela, a hairdresser, first attended a theatre as an adult, and had been anxious about what to wear:

Yes, 'cause I didn't really know what to put on and erm, I was like, oh God, I don't want to be too much, I don't want to be too this, and I was like, oh I know, I'll just wear black, 'cause in black I'll be safe, do you know what I mean? And then when I got there, and I realised, be who you want to be, it doesn't matter. It's like saying you can't go into Marks and Spencer shopping unless you've got a fur coat, anyone can come in. So I feel as if [attending has] broke down them barriers.

Having dispensed with these barriers herself, Angela volunteered that she was aware of similar anxieties on behalf of her customers, to whom she evangelises about the theatre, wanting to make the experience as open to others as it has become to her. Again, the reported anxieties of her customers about theatregoing were couched in terms of anxiety about dress. Her strategy was to reassure them:

Some of my clients have said to me, 'What do you wear? Do you have to wear any, like, evening things?' and it's like, 'What, no you just go in your jeans, you know' and

it's like, 'I thought you had to sort of like have a fur stole to go to the theatre' and it's 'No you don't have to have a fur stole, you'd probably look out of place if you did, you know, you just put on what you want to put on, there's people there sort of obviously going out for dinner afterwards, sort of very smart...But there's people there in just like their jeans and a jacket and you know every walk of life, everything, so yes, it's like as if I'm educating my clients on the theatre as well.

It is interesting here that Angela, reporting the speech of her customers at the hairdresser's, uses such class signifiers as 'the fur stole' and evening dress in contrast to jeans.

Other contributors also commented on dress. Some felt that where dress was informal, for instance at the Royal Court, it was part of making them feel at home. In contrast, others like Susan and her youth theatre friends enjoyed feeling that they had to dress up to attend the theatre as this was part of what made it a special event. Interestingly, two people, independently of each other, said that while they felt that dressing up to go to some theatres (the Empire, the Philharmonic Hall) was expected, they intentionally chose to wear more relaxed clothes there. Museum Education Officer Joyce saw this as a defiance of the expected code and an assertion of her equality with other audience members and a refusal to conform, saying: 'I'm sort of the type of person who says, "I've got as much right to be here as you have"'. Teacher Sarah went further, seeing her choice to wear less formal clothing as a purposively subversive act, designed to counter the elitism she perceived as being related to theatregoing expressed through dress:

I don't [dress up], because I think I'm almost making a political statement by not...You know, because I'm, I'm sort of looking at all these people who have got dressed up dead posh and I'm going in there going 'I do this all the time [attending the theatre], this is nothing different for me', and it's sort of...You know, 'you think you're better

than I am, but you're not' [laughs]. This is a not an elitist pursuit. You know. And it shouldn't be.

Sarah clearly felt that theatregoing is a separating mechanism and that dress is one of the weapons used in vying for position within the field; she felt that dress can be used as a signifier of elitism, and this was something she chose not to collude in. Paradoxically, her confidence in this demonstrated her belonging; she was so safe and comfortable in the space that she could wear what she wanted. In the ensuing discussion, fellow teacher Ursula pointed out that the reason Sarah could choose to 'dress down' in more valorised venues was precisely because of her confidence in the social space of the theatre. Ursula felt this was not something people who attended less frequently could be confident in doing; she clearly felt that Sarah's congruent *habitus* in a valorised space gave her licence to play with the unwritten rules and conventions of that space, in a way those with a less congruent *habitus* could not.

The question of dress was a vexed and complex one for these theatregoers, bound up in a sense of identity and belonging, social enjoyment, the anxiety of social fit and social opprobrium, and a sometimes conscious recognition of its use as a tool to gain distinction. This was seen briefly in Chapter 4, where a man's approval of the Everyman of the 1970s was: 'It's great and you don't have to dress up or anything' (in Merkin, 2004, p.76). This preoccupation with dress is not surprising given that dress is such a visible (and treacherous) signifier of so many things including social status; it is also one of the few tangible things around social fit and *habitus* that may be easiest to articulate.

Also related to dress, in the first focus group, Karen talked about attending the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a franchise which encourages audience members to dress in costume as part of a now standardised ritual. She describes the paradox of having to be outrageous to fit in with this particular audience:

Karen: We went to what was it erm, oh God [pause while she recalls the title]  
*The Rocky Horror Show*, and we dressed up because we thought...

Maria: In the *Rocky Horror* way? Or in...

Karen: Yeah

Susan: The proper way

Karen: But again, we were saying, what shall we wear? You can't wear  
ordinary clothes, cos you feel out of place

Maria: Absolutely. Which is funny really

Karen: But there were a few people that weren't, and you think I'm glad I did  
it, because although we weren't wearing much, a trouser suit on and  
we had a coloured hat on and a bow tie, but, it was still dressed up

Maria: So you'd still joined in

Karen: Yeah, we'd still joined in, but if we hadn't have done, I think we'd have  
felt a bit odd because with everyone surrounding us...

Shows like *Rocky Horror* with its prescribed dress code provide some reassurance by at least giving audience members a clear steer on what to wear. At the Royal Court, *Ladies Day* achieved something similar, by being able to signal through marketing and pre-publicity what was acceptable in terms of dress. Audience members were encouraged to 'dress to impress', reflecting the dress code of the races and capitalising on the relationship working class women are reputed to have with fashion: 'Liverpool girls are well known for looking their best when they go for a night out. Aintree [racecourse] is always full of people looking amazing so hopefully

they will be getting their best and brightest outfits on for this show!’ (producer Kevin Fearon, quoted on Liverpool Live TV, 2013).

The thick descriptions are useful in illuminating the effects of such signals, as in this excerpt from a thick description I wrote following a performance of *Ladies Day*, which shows that audience members were happy to take their cue from Fearon and the press:

Around me there is clear evidence of a good night out being enjoyed. Women have their hair set: there is long hair, shiny hair, definitely coiffed hair, and some serious ‘dos’; there are several hats and fascinators, jewellery, nice dresses, sequinned evening bags. They are dressed for *Ladies Day* (later I read there is a prize every Friday and Saturday night for the ‘best dressed group’. This makes a good link in theatregoers’ minds between the theatre show and the popular cultural practice of dressing up for Ladies’ Day at Liverpool’s Aintree Racecourse). A woman fans herself with a black paper Spanish fan. This is despite the air handling being better than any theatre I have been in.

The issue reflected here, refracted through anxiety about what to wear, is in fact a wider social anxiety about fitting in and following the unwritten rules of a social occasion. Getting dress ‘wrong’ though is a very visible sign of difference, so it is not surprising it is preoccupying to those who don’t know the rules (or don’t know that there are no rules). As seen here, this can be alleviated by the signals given by the theatre before the show, as happens with the ritualised dressing for *The Rocky Horror Show*, and by the competition during *Ladies Day*, which clearly signed a dress code to potential audiences. This can also be done through theatre marketing.



## **Marketing – fitting the offer to the *habitus***

Marketing messages are key to letting potential audience members know not only about the show, but about how the venue will be suitable to their *habitus*. Such messages are expressed through press and public relations, print such as posters and fliers, and online services such as social media channels and the theatre's website. While shows change, the Royal Court's self-presentation is consistent. It shows the Royal Court as accessible and welcoming, it foregrounds music, comedy and its local cast, it emphasises the audience and the 'good night out'. These messages are reiterated in press stories, in the Royal Court's programmes, and on the website. These messages of fun and belonging are continuously reinforced by a range of media available to the audience before they approach the theatre.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the short filmed 'trailers' the Royal Court produces to promote each show. In common with other trailers produced by theatres in the field (for instance the Everyman and Playhouse and to a lesser extent Unity Theatre), excerpts from the show are included. Distinctively for the Royal Court, the audience is just as integral to each trailer, with footage of local people commenting on the shows in their local accents from their seats in the auditorium. The video for *Bouncers* (Royal Court Theatre, 2013) for instance starts with catchy popular music (*Another One Bites the Dust*), the Royal Court logo and then the tagline 'At the heart of great Liverpool theatre'. What follows are images from the show intercut with quotes from (often local and online) reviews – "'It delivers on all counts" 9/10, liverpoolconfidential.com'. Following this opening, the first words spoken are by an audience member, saying in his Liverpool accent, 'hilarious, absolutely hilarious, we had a really good time'. Audience members are shown commenting throughout the trailer ('fabulously funny', 'what I found funny about it was, I can relate to all the characters'). The result of this is more than a preview that provides a greater understanding of the content of the show or that draws

audiences in with samples of the music and jokes. It shows audiences they will not only understand but also enjoy what's on stage. More significantly, there is a glimpse of what it is to be an audience member, including a sense of what the auditorium is like and who the other audience members are. In other words, it is a reassuring introduction to being a Royal Court audience member, and this is particularly beneficial for first time theatregoers or those new to the Royal Court.

It is useful to put this friendly and affable approach in context within the field of Liverpool theatre. The Royal Court's trailers are in stark contrast to the Everyman Playhouse's trailers, which are theatrical and darkly dramatic. In the Everyman Playhouse's trailers, the show, its aesthetics, and its national importance as illustrated by its consecration in reviews by the quality national press are foregrounded. The director is named, the music is original incidental music that underscores the action, and, where there is speech, actors talk in Received Pronunciation about the nature of the play. The Everyman Playhouse's trailers are much more atmospheric, drawing the watcher into the world of the play, emphasising the world of what is on stage over what it is like to be in the auditorium. One Everyman Playhouse trailer, for *The Kite Runner*, does show audience members commenting on the show, but it is notable they are in a segment of their own at the end of the trailer as an addendum to the drama of the play rather than integral to the trailer and the event, and their much more neutral accents (more middle class, and less 'Scouse'), are also conspicuous by comparison. Fun is not emphasised; even uproariously funny comedy *The Ladykillers* (2011) has the air of a thriller.

Wacquant (2006, p.7), writing on Bourdieu and his work, links a sense of feeling 'at home' with sharing a similar *habitus* to others around you. This is supported by empirical research on cultural attendance; both the Creative Research study (2007) and Scollen's (2008) research suggest that attenders and non-attenders alike have concerns about whether or not they will

see people from the same socio-economic group when they attend the theatre, or about feeling they may not fit in. 'For those who do not believe they have the social status to be a part of this group (or culture) there is a sense that they will not be welcome to attend and that the theatre experience will not be relevant or satisfying to them' (Scollen, 2008, p.6). The demographic data collected by the Royal Court shows that audiences are largely made up of people from lower socio-economic groups. The Royal Court's marketing reassuringly shows potential audience members that this is the case before they even attend.

### **Perceptions of the Royal Court and the field of Liverpool theatre**

It is not only marketing that gives theatregoers and potential theatregoers signals about the theatre they may attend. Transmission of this message can precede actual experience, and whether accurate or not, informs the potential theatregoer about whether they will feel 'at home' there, as happened with Angela and her preconceptions of the *Everyman* discussed in the last chapter. Chapters 3 and 4 placed the Royal Court within the field of Liverpool theatregoing, and the perception of a theatre's place in the field is part of what informs people about whether they will feel at home. When asked, research participants often had strong opinions about the field, and the relative positions of theatres within it. They made clear distinctions between the Royal Court and other Liverpool theatres, based on their perceptions of their audiences and their repertoire. Only some of this was based on direct experience.

Generally, focus group members viewed Royal Court audiences as more relaxed than other theatres in the field. They point to 'hen parties' as evidence that the Royal Court audience is more down to earth, celebratory and fun. Empire audiences were used as a contrast by some focus group members, who saw them as less likely than Royal Court audiences to participate. Karen gave the example of the heckling of the Tory character in *Special Measures* at the Royal Court: 'You wouldn't get that [heckling] in the Empire, you just wouldn't'. When asked to explain

this, the suggestion from focus group members seemed to be that Empire audience were 'snooty' to use Susan's word, or even right wing. The Empire was further associated with a higher social class of people because of its repertoire:

Karen: I'd say the Empire has the posh people.

Susan: Because they're like the West End shows aren't they, so you'd say that [is] more of the posh.

All four of the members of this focus group agreed the Empire audience was 'posh'. This was interesting, as three of them (Susan, Sarah and Ursula) had attended as children and had been positive about it and did not mention any sense of exclusion or feeling out of place, and the other had not attended. As seen in chapter 4, this perception is actually in contrast to the more mixed Empire audiences, but is nonetheless characterised here as more homogenous and 'posh'. This is perhaps due to the capital it has banked with its historical relationship with high art, the connotations of its current building and placement in the city as discussed in Chapter 4, or the occasional ballet and opera it programmes alongside more popular musicals.

Angela recognised a more mixed Empire audience, describing it as a venue for special occasions to which people travel in large groups on coaches from a wide catchment. She did though agree with focus group members that the Empire is not a place for joining in:

[The Empire is] very mixed, lots of mixed age groups, even from Manchester, Wigan, [they] go for a birthday [...]. They cast the net wider [...It's] quite mixed but not everyone wants to do audience participation in there, y'know.

Asked about the Playhouse, regular theatregoer Sarah described its audiences as 'middle class', and felt this was where you went to see 'proper plays' which were 'sort of, you know, thespian', and felt the Everyman was similar. In contrast, Angela spoke penetratingly about the separating

mechanism of theatre in relationship to the Everyman; she felt the Everyman was 'like a secret society', one that was once closed to her, but in which everyone else who attended was acquainted with each other:

I feel the audience at the Everyman, it seems to me a lot of people know each other, there's a lot of people who know each other too, obviously they've gone there for years and that and y'know erm [...at the Everyman] it's like 'we used to go to uni or school together'.

This sense of a clique made Angela feel like an outsider before she even attended, so much so that she wouldn't enter the café never mind the auditorium, as she was very conscious of her lack of appropriate social and cultural capital. When she eventually attended a show (after a positive experience performing there following a participatory community activity), her sense of being different to the regular Everyman-goer was exacerbated by a pervasive social marker, and she contrasts this with visiting the Royal Court:

I think probably like the accents that you hear in the Everyman, it's not like all Scouse accents, it's like they are posh. But in like the Royal Court it's all people from Liverpool, Wirral, or wherever, just regular people who wanna go the theatre for a night out and that's why I like it, it's fun.

Plays at the Everyman are seen as more challenging, and more highbrow. In her depth interview, Angela contrasted the Royal Court, where she felt the repertoire was 'a fun thing', with the Everyman:

I think with the Everyman it's always like, y'feel like, I feel like, like you've learned something, I feel sort of enriched in some way, that I've learned something about

something, y'know, or a different opinion on something, erm, but the Royal Court is like the other way. Definitely.

This was not necessarily a negative; for Angela there was a sense of self-improvement at the Everyman: 'Yeah. I think maybe for me leaving school at 15, I'm always up for new knowledge, so if I learn something [...]', although she was perhaps more comfortable with the 'fun' of the Royal Court.

Angela contrasted her perception of an elite Everyman audience with her view of the Royal Court audience, which she felt was more ordinary and without the airs and graces she perceived elsewhere: 'But in the Royal Court, it's like the people from the bus stop have gone in, with their shopping. Shall I say it? [They're] working class'.

In the qualitative research, few of the contributors talked about attending Unity Theatre even when prompted. The exception was Sarah, a teacher, who had taken her schoolchildren there, and who commented 'I think you get a very middle class audience at the Unity'. Sarah also described Unity Theatre as the place 'where you take a bit more of a risk'.

Sarah was able to distinguish across the field of Liverpool theatre, doing her own field analysis:

You get your regional kind of humour, local theatre for local people here [at the Royal Court], then you get your big West End shows, you get your proper musicals up at the Empire [Sarah is being supported throughout this by Susan and Ursula]. Y'know, you get your comedies or your locals at the Neptune [Epstein] or you know, you sort of work your way around.

In summary, the contributors to the qualitative research had a distinct view of the field of Liverpool theatregoing. Theatres were distinguished on the basis of who audience members were, often in class terms ('snooty' and 'posh', but also explicitly as 'middle class' and 'working

class'), on the basis of how audiences behaved, with participation and 'banter' or 'heckling' seen as welcome at particular theatres; and on the basis of their repertoires, which again they linked to class. What was on stage, and who else went to see it, was very important in making these audience members feel 'at home'. This information about theatres was transmitted even where people had not attended. This may be due to the theatres' banked capitals, or the connotations of the theatre buildings themselves.

### **Physical and imagined space: the building and its location**

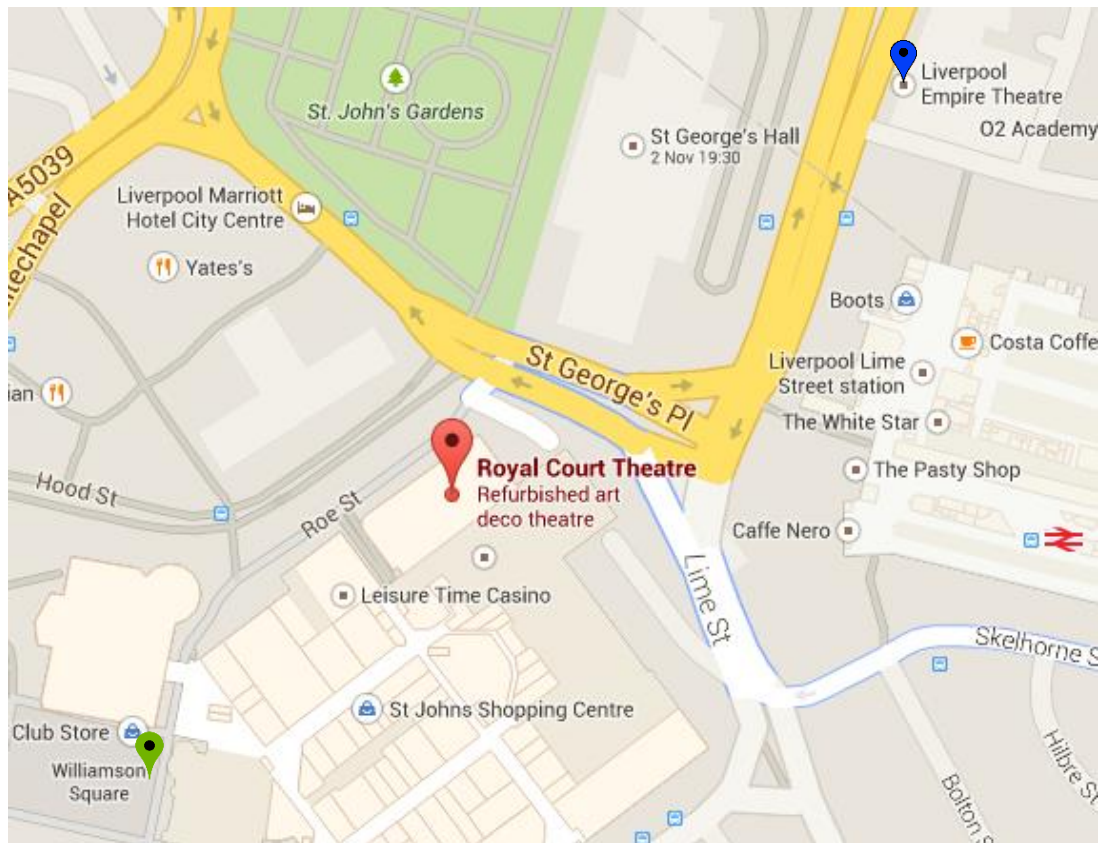
In this conceptualisation of what a theatre means to audience members, the physical relationship that an audience member with her/his particular *habitus* has with the theatre, its building and its place in the city is also important. Theatre semiotician Marvin Carlson says, 'an audience not only goes to the theatre; it goes to the particular part of the city where the theatre is located, and the memories and associations of that part of the city help to provide a reception context for any performance seen there' (2003, p.140). The theatre is a landmark and has relationships to other landmarks in the panorama of the city, in the real and in the imaginary, both contemporary and in history, and these have connotations that signal to the audience member their place in relation to it, as discussed in Chapter 3.

The Royal Court Theatre is on Roe Street in Liverpool city centre. As seen in Chapter 3, it is a short walk from Lime Street, where Liverpool's main railway station is situated alongside the Empire Theatre, the station and the Empire facing the grand, neo-classical St George's Hall (see Figure 12). However, its placement is very different from this Victorian grandeur. As seen in Chapter 3, Roe Street and adjoining Queen Square was long associated with commerce, becoming the central market district of the city; the space was cleared to make way for various city plans that only partly came to fruition. The result has been a neglected and rundown area containing various architectural styles. Today, Roe Street itself has been widened to make way

for an eight-lane dual carriageway accommodating buses on their routes in and out of the city centre. The carriageway is separated by a safety divider limiting crossing points between the Gyratory (a series of twelve bus stands) and the Royal Court. Beyond the Gyratory, Queen Square is no longer home to the elegant Stork Hotel (once the mansion of the eponymous Mr Roe), or the temporary car park that replaced the fruit market. It is home instead to the modern Marriot hotel and a variety of chain pubs and restaurants (La Tasca, Buffalo Jacks, Nando, Burger King, and All Bar One). Approaching the theatre on foot from Lime Street Station then is difficult due to the major roads and traffic. Doing so passes the slightly notorious pub, the *Penny Farthing* ('This must be the worst pub in Liverpool if not in the world. Full of drunks, dossers and the like. Avoid unless you are desperate'; Beer in the Evening, 2013) which is next door to the Royal Court.

Approaching the Royal Court through town passes the Playhouse which commands Williamson Square. Turning right past the Official LFC (Liverpool Football Club) Shop takes the theatregoer along the western elevation of St John's Shopping Centre passing the shopfronts of the 99p Stores and Leisure Time Casino. The elegance of John Foster junior's covered market has been replaced by this Shopping Centre, described by Pollard, Pevsner and Sharples (2006, p.336) as a 'bleak and brutal affair', only made worse by the 1990s' 'prettification' that involved the addition of green reflective glass gables. This 1970s' edifice is 'mainly loathed' according to Neild (2015).





*Figure 12: The current position of the Royal Court Theatre*

*The Theatre now faces onto Roe Street opposite Queen Square (large pin). Great Charlotte Street here has been buried by St John's Shopping Centre. Pin bottom left shows the position of the Playhouse Theatre in Williamson Square. Pin upper right shows the Empire Theatre opposite the neoclassical St George's Hall.*

*Source: Google Maps, 2014*



*Figure 13: Royal Court, Liverpool: Current position in the city, as of March 2014*

*The art deco theatre no longer enjoys a prominent corner position, but now abuts the modern St John's Shopping Centre; this end of the thoroughfare of Great Charlotte Street has all but disappeared.*

*Author's photo, 26/3/14.*

Many theatregoers will face the green glass gables of St John's as they approach the Royal Court Theatre from the bus stops outside; others will approach through the precinct itself as it houses the nearest car park. This was the approach I took to attend the *Variety Lunch* in 2014, as in this thick description:

The car park is in St John's Precinct, a modern shopping centre built on the site of an old and much loved market. The current precinct is the second or third iteration, following city redevelopment plans. Nobody seems to like the newer version, and there is still nostalgia about the 'old' market, demolished 'during the general spate of civic vandalism of the 1960s' (BBC, 2014c). The route from the car park takes me through the modern, white and green plastic and glass precinct, passing Poundland,

Home Bargain and the Discount Book Shop on my way to the Royal Court. There is a surprising amount of shoppers for a Wednesday in the last week of January, before the first post-Christmas pay day. Despite some poor quality coats and the bargain basement shopping experience, Liverpool looks to be thriving.

The approaches to the Royal Court Theatre then are not particularly impressive. As was seen in Chapter 4, the current siting of the theatre is in contrast to the prominent positions of other theatres in the city, relating to their position in the field of contemporary Liverpool theatregoing. The high economic capital Empire for instance occupies a conspicuous position in the city's neo-classical 'Cultural Quarter' facing the grand St George's Hall and adjacent to the World Museum and the Walker Art Gallery; the high cultural capital Playhouse dominates nearby Williamson Square; and the more *avant-garde* Unity and high capital Everyman are almost a mile away in the so-called 'Georgian Quarter', close to the university campuses and student accommodation. The Royal Court, overlooked by the grand St George's Hall, is just on the wrong side of the border of the 'Cultural Quarter', a physical border made by roads and railings, in a space long associated with commerce, nowadays discount shopping, cheap drinking, and waiting for a host of buses.

While this symbolic isolation from the valorised 'Cultural Quarter' and the *avant-garde* 'Georgian Quarter' provides a metaphor for the Royal Court's distance from the cultural policy infrastructure, it perhaps also gives the theatre an advantage in its relationship with its particular audience. The Royal Court's topographical relationship to the city centre means it can be perceived to be outside of the elite game of theatre, despite being part of that game, and associated instead with the down to earth and unpretentious around it. Architect Dr Robert MacDonald of Liverpool John Moores University claims of St John's Shopping Centre that '[i]nternally, it actually feels more like authentic Liverpool. You can buy Hollands' pies and puds,

stuff from Matalan, Aldi and Clintons. On an afternoon it does feel busy and buzzy. It is raw popular culture and not for the snobs, toffs or the stuffy' (quoted in Neild, 2015). And those epithets could be equally applied to the Royal Court.

When the theatregoer arrives at the building however, they are presented with an impressive art deco edifice. It was constructed in 1938 to replace the previous Royal Court Theatre which had been damaged by fire. It is an attractive red brick building with contrasting horizontal friezes of fluted decoration. It has a canopy between the ground and first storeys, which is currently home to a yellow *Superlambanana*<sup>8</sup>, often 'dressed' by the theatre to complement each show. Supersized posters of the current and forthcoming shows also adorn the front.



*Figure 14: Façade of the Royal Court showing the yellow Superlambanana.*

*Author's photo, 26/3/14.*

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<sup>8</sup> The *Superlambanana* by artist Taro Chiezo became a Liverpool icon during the city's Capital of Culture year in 2008. 125 smaller replicas of the original were made and decorated by artists and community groups, including Beatles designs, mandalas, and one, by artist Brian Hanlon, of the Lord Mayor.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the theatre has had a variety of ownerships throughout its eighty years and latterly had served different functions (as a part-time cinema, as a pop concert venue), before being closed for a short period preceding the first stage of its refurbishment in 2005. These changes are written on the building; parts are still in a poor state of repair and 'temporary' adjustments have been made which remain apparent, and these sometimes obscure the impressive original decoration and underlying beauty of the building. For instance, on first impression, the interior of the box office appears to be a utilitarian box with functional counters behind grilles. It is awkwardly placed at the corner of the building when the main entrance is at the front on Roe Street. On closer inspection, under the posters and display boards in the box office is beaded walnut panelling with original gilt signage; the ceiling is curvilinear with contrasting coving, and there is what appears to be marble facings on steps, although these steps currently lead to a false wall. The box office used to be the main entrance of the opulent 1938 building (Theatres Trust, 2015), hence the grandeur (and indeed the false wall which blocks off a disused corridor that leads to the once grand basement bar, said to have been modelled on the liner *The Queen Mary*). However, the theatre's current configuration hides the glamour. It has audience members returning outside once they have bought their ticket and heading along Roe Street to re-enter the building. This makes for a confusing and not very prepossessing approach to the theatre. This is reflected in this excerpt from a thick description I wrote following a daytime visit for a *Variety Lunch*:

Turning the corner into Roe Street, I see several people in couples and small groups outside the theatre. The box office still gives a shabby impression and I am still confused about the door, and the word processed sign that tells me to pull not push suggests others are too. There is a curtain of warmth as I open it. I go into a utilitarian office that feels a little like a construction site office. There are a couple of posters up of the next offerings. This is the first time I've seen the box office with two staff on. As

usual, there is very little waiting time; I give my name, and my booking is found very quickly. There is no attempt to sell me another show or to take additional information from me to expand the database.

Going outside again from the box office to the theatre's main door, there are a few people smoking and waiting outside, mostly in small groups. I open the big, traditional theatre doors and hand my paper printout to the lad on Front of House who is sat at a tall desk wearing a headset; he greets me (I nearly get a smile this time), refers to a seating plan and puts me on [seat] E11 (again)...I go along the dark corridor, passing the little ornate sweet kiosk which looks like something from a bygone cinema, and arrive at the entrance to the auditorium.

*Excerpt from thick description, Variety Lunch, 2014.*

The theatre is built on a human scale with entrances on ground level. Stepping inside the building therefore does not feel daunting, as it might do to step into nearby temples of culture such as the Walker Art Gallery, World Museum or St George's Hall, with their broad flights of stone steps and colonnaded porches that emphasise the comparative smallness, in all senses, of the putative visitor. Nor does it feel pretentious as it may for those entering the more *avant-garde* theatres. In fact, the neglect of previous years is apparent in the unkempt entrance and public areas. Entering into the building is to enter a similar mix of nostalgic deco grandeur and shabby modern pragmatism to the outside of the building.

One of the focus group members, Edna, identified the scruffiness of the communal parts of the Royal Court theatre as part of what made her feel at home. When asked whether the planned renovation would affect whether they felt at home, these participants expressed misgivings, drawing on their experience of the new public areas of the Sterling Prize-winning Everyman theatre, which they felt were too 'posh' and therefore they 'don't feel like it's for us any more'.

One of the group, Patsy, summed this up: 'I think the posh part...they [the Everyman] might have gained something, but they've lost part as well'. The 'scruffiness' of the old Everyman was seen as part of its heart, and similarly the scruffiness of the Royal Court, especially in these interstitial communal spaces, acts as a gentle and unassuming threshold, allowing an easy transition into the relaxed and informal communal experience of the auditorium. The mix of old and new, shabby and opulent, is also a potent reminder of the theatre's past and of its importance in the historical landscape of the city.

Carlson suggests a theatre building as 'a kind of memory machine' (2003, p.142), housing mutually constructed cultural associations. Memory was drawn on by research participants, who bound up their feelings about the current Royal Court building with the Royal Court(s) of the past. Those who talked about the Royal Court Theatre building often did so nostalgically, relating personal associations with the theatre to their sense of feeling at home. For instance, some felt that the theatre's longevity in the city was helpful in making it accessible, particularly for older people. Hairdresser Angela said:

I think that sort of the older generation of Liverpool, it's like that's always been there, the outside has very rarely, hasn't changed very much, you know so I think that's part of like Liverpool's heritage isn't it you know so I think it's nice that the older people can leisurely go there for a really good price and enjoy it and have a laugh and you know, see the theatre.

Some on TripAdvisor recalled the theatre in its time as a pop concert venue (from the 1970s to 2005), with contributor 'tellbert' (2013) connecting this to the theatre's 'warm homely feel'. Part of feeling at home was, for these contributors, the Royal Court's familiarity and its non-threatening and, for some, nostalgic threshold; the theatre building has become part of their own emotional landscape as well as the landscape of their city.

## **Physical space: The auditorium**

Entering the auditorium at the Royal Court is a striking experience, especially after leaving the dark and shabby front of house corridor. The bright red, gold and white auditorium, part traditional proscenium arch theatre and part modern democratic space, is in stark contrast not only to the dark and scruffy interstitial spaces, but also to the 'icy solemnity' Bourdieu associates with major theatres:

Formal refinement...is part of the paraphernalia which always announces the sacred character, separate and separating, of high culture – the icy solemnity of the great museums, the grandiose luxury of the opera-houses and major theatres, the decor and decorum of concert-halls. Everything takes place as if the working class audience vaguely grasped what is implied in conspicuous formality, both in art and in life (2010, p.26).

This contrast has been intentional. The theatre still has its original proscenium arch and 'royal boxes', and until it became a pop venue these were complemented by rows of traditional red plush tip up seats and huge chandeliers. This 'grandiose luxury' and the paraphernalia of 'formal refinement' did have the potential to be awe inspiring. However, refurbishment has been radical, and the missing seating has been replaced by curvilinear bench tables in stark white gloss as well as cabaret-style group seating. In contrast to 'icy solemnity' (2010, p.26), the present Royal Court auditorium is a relaxed and informal environment with seating arranged in social groups, and which smells of fish and chips. This excerpt from a thick description gives something of its atmosphere:

At the Royal Court, theatre is sold as part of a package which includes dinner and a drink in the 'cabaret-style' stalls... In contrast to the shabby public areas, when I enter the stalls I enter a newly restored auditorium, the Art Deco splendour complementing



the traditional proscenium arch picked out in gold. The auditorium is full of traditional red plush, and there is a beautifully-lit red velvet gilded curtain. To the sides, the boxes remain, facing outwards to the auditorium to show off their occupants to the audience rather than towards the stage to see the show. Contrasting with this are very modern gloss white curved bench tables, like a casino or an expensive lecture hall, following the sweep of the whole auditorium. At the front are several round, cabaret-style tables. Some audience members sit around the tables in convivial groups, with pints, wine buckets and food. Half the stalls have come for dinner, and the auditorium smells of salt and vinegar and chips. Other audience members share the long white curved tables, sitting in rows on comfy red plush swivel receptionist seats. Tables have numbers on, displayed in number holders like placements at a wedding. During the pre-show, there is some movement around the auditorium, to get drinks and to say hello and mingle. Most of the audience are already seated when I get here, the preshow as important as the show, perhaps facilitated by the bar at the back of the auditorium.

*Excerpt from thick description, Ladies Day, 2013.*

The permissive spaces in between seating clusters and the swivel stools that turn to face your friends or the stage, allow for a different sort of sociability, the making of shared bonds and chance encounters. This would be less likely in a traditional theatre with inflexible aisles and tiered rows of seats. The innovation of food and drink being served in the auditorium before the show results in a longer engagement in the space, with people arriving much earlier than in other theatres and making the space their own for what after all is a messy, visceral activity. There is the temporary 'dissolution of social order' (Stevens, 2013) that defines liminal spaces, a change in conventions from those that apply in everyday social spaces and indeed in other

theatres. Audience members speak to others they have never met (to ask and share opinions, to offer to buy them drinks, to ask if they will look after their bags); audience members move about the space; they sit in social groups and they join other social groups, they wave across the auditorium to people they recognise; it is a little like a party. It is a convivial social space.

While the innovation of modern curved tables and grouped seating facilitates a hospitable and ludic space where audience members can enjoy the event in social groups, the original, traditional elements of the theatre's architecture are also seen as welcoming by audience members. For instance, when asked what about the theatre makes her feel 'at home', interviewee Joyce talks about the Royal Court being:

old fashioned, and the use of the red, the old red with the wood and the gold painting and I don't know, it's all closed in and dark...it's just dead cosy and exciting and I don't know, I just like it like that, it's just how I like it. I like the traditional theatre thing.

'The traditional theatre thing' is also referred to by interviewee Angela, who says about her first attendance at the Royal Court:

it was a bit sort of like stepping back in time, because it was a completely different vibe and it was sort of, it reminded me of when I used to see old time music hall on the telly...I think it's a nice thing, I think it's a nice thing, I think it's like sort of a, it can't be recreated that and I think they're trying to keep that sort of, that sort of way of it alive and that's great the way they've got all the history and photographs around, you know.

Inside the auditorium as outside, the sense of nostalgia is important. Both Joyce and Angela seem to perceive the Royal Court, Liverpool as a sort of construct of music hall as refracted through the lens of a television camera, a 'traditional theatre thing' of the imaginary. While the

Royal Court auditorium utilises old-fashioned tropes such as the boxes and proscenium arch, and while the current theatre building existed at the time of later music hall, the history shows it was in fact a legitimate theatre during this period (see Chapter 3). However, the comparison is perhaps perceptive as there are similarities between this space and that of the ‘new music halls’ of the late 19th Century such as the Oxford Music Hall, London (V&A, 2015), including the serving of food and drink at seats and tables within the auditorium rather than in a separate restaurant, café or bar space as in other theatres. Serving food and treating audience members as social groups whose aim is to enjoy themselves on a night out, rather than as discerning theatrical audiences, is key to the sense of feeling at home.



*Figure 15: View of the stalls from the Circle during a Variety Lunch*

*There are no traditional tip up seats in the Stalls. These have been replaced by rows of curved bench seats, and table seating. Audience members tend to cluster in groups on the benches as well as around the tables. Note that audience members are on average older for the Variety Lunches.*

*Author's photo, 26/3/14*

The Royal Court sometimes plays on this sense of history and nostalgia, for instance in the use of Music Hall as a setting in the first half of *Sons of the Desert*, and in its marketing emails which are headed 'Royal Court Liverpool Telegram'.

The theatre's 'pub grub'-style dinner is also important. The menu is eclectic, offering sea bass, steak, salt and pepper chicken, Portobello mushrooms, and chips before each evening show. Desserts such as tiramisu torte and a cheeseboard are served in the interval. The theatre also serves 'The Royal Court's famous scouse', and this is the only dish available at the daytime *Variety Lunch* events. (Scouse is a local dish from which 'Scousers' get their nickname, and this and its connotations are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.) The thick description of attendance at one *Variety Lunch* event gives some sense of the informal atmosphere and the conviviality:

This is the first time I have entered the auditorium without being overwhelmed by the smell of fish and chips, but there is a homely food smell nonetheless. I'm at the curvy end of row again, between a big woman and a small man. Somehow being sandwiched between this Bamforth postcard coupling seems fitting for a *Variety Lunch*. I realise I really have no idea what to expect from a *Variety Lunch*. I'm surprised by how busy the auditorium is though, busy enough to have the Circle seats open upstairs. A hot bowl of scouse arrives unordered just as I sit down. I look around. Everyone's having scouse. The set for the evening show, a stained glass sunburst surrounding a purple rhombus of plush curtain representing the convent of *Once a Catholic*, is up, but with a mic downstage centre waiting for the *Variety Lunch* acts. Behind me, at the back of the auditorium, the bar is open and is moderately busy, mostly selling pints and halves of lager. There is also a tea urn set up at the front with a small queue that never seems to go down, one patient grey haired person in a cardigan replacing another. My scouse

arrives...This one is a soupy version, eaten from a bowl. There are chunky potatoes and carrots and big pieces of lamb with ribs of savoy cabbage. It isn't dainty, it's old school and traditional. And it isn't bad at all. A grey woman in powder blue walks very slowly up the aisle leaning forward and trying not to spill a mug of tea. Everyone has mugs, there are no genteel cups and saucers. People with walking sticks are struggling to get along rows. People are laughing.

*Excerpt from thick description, Variety Lunch, 2014.*

The food is a facilitator of the relaxed, homely and friendly environment, as is the bar. People buy rounds, with strangers chatting and offering drinks to strangers when they get their own round in. The seating, reminiscent of a bingo or social club, facilitates group chat, and it's more like an afternoon in a pub than a theatre. Several research participants mentioned feeling 'at home' in the environment of the Royal Court, and related this to the food and seating:

Sarah:           You see, when you think about the years and years that it [the Royal Court] was closed and what it used to be before, and then I think the first time I came in was the very first run of *Brick Up The Mersey Tunnels* was the first time I'd been in here since the bands in the '80s and we had seats downstairs and because they had the tables and chairs it had that sort of variety club kind of feel to it [yeah], and the informality and then every time after that that I've booked, I've sort of booked to come and eat as well.

The placement in the city, the architecture of the building (both intentional and in its state of disrepair) and the purposeful design of the auditorium lead to a very particular social space. It is infused with a sense of nostalgia for both a real and remembered lived experience, and also as a

simulacrum for a particular sort of imaginary theatre. This makes the Royal Court welcoming, comfortable and familiar to a particular sort of *habitus*.

## **Staffing**

Staffing at the Royal Court also helps audience members to feel at home. Staffing is low key. At performance times, front of house staff appear at strategic points of the building – to sell and take tickets, to indicate seat locations, and to serve food and drink; their physical presence is noticeable but they remain largely unobtrusive. Staff wear ordinary black t-shirts and trousers, and those at the theatre entrance are more reminiscent of door staff at a club than theatre staff. This is also because they are predominantly white, male and middle-aged, and with local, working class accents. This is unusual in theatres, which often attract front of house staff from local universities, who tend to be young, white and middle class, or volunteers who want to help out the theatre, who are more often white middle class women. Further, the demeanour of front of house staff is deadpan and downbeat, rather than fussy or over-solicitous; Glennis, who, like Lynne attended a secondary modern school and is of retirement age, describes this as a lack of ‘pretence’. There is almost a performative display of class *habitus* which allows audience members to identify with staff members, rather than seeing them as a potential ‘Other’ that could create a barrier. As Patsy says of the staff, ‘They’re exactly the same as us’.

At the Royal Court, front of house staff rarely intervene in audience members’ enjoyment of their night out, but rather signpost where necessary, and in this way act as facilitators to the enjoyment rather than enforcers of a particular culture. They don’t patrol the auditorium and they don’t stand sentinel at its sides looking for infractions of rules (this happens at many other theatres where ushers look out for contraventions such as alcohol being brought into unlicensed auditoria, copyright-breaching photography of set and costume, or behaviour which may interrupt immersion or be viewed as disruptive to other audience members). Thus front of

house staff reinforce the social nature of the space, paradoxically by not enforcing rules within the space, thus making it a space that belongs to the audience. They contribute to the easy going lack of stuffiness that both the building and the repertoire encourage. This allows the audience members themselves to create their own *doxa* in the space.

### **Social space, conventions and *doxa***

Wacquant (2006, p.7) links feeling 'at home' with a sense of a shared *habitus*. This sense of 'collective history' (Bourdieu, 1977, p85), shared dialect, and possession of similar levels of economic and cultural capital, gives rise to this sense of feeling at home. In a theatre, this is not only reinforced by what's on stage, but by the people who create the social space, and the *doxa* and *nomos* that develop within and as a result of the social space; the space itself is meaningless without the meaning people bring to it and put upon it. The creation and fostering of the social space within a theatre is both conscious strategy and unconscious behaviour, and is contributed to by the creative team including the performers on stage, the staff members, and perhaps especially the audience members. Between them they create the *doxa*, the values and norms that audience members internalise as 'normal' ways to behave. Terdiman, in his introduction to Bourdieu's *The Force of law: Toward a sociology of the juridical field* (1986), says *doxa* 'implies the immediate agreement elicited by that which appears self-evident, transparently normal' (1987, p.812). Internalising the *doxa* of a particular field leads to a *habitus* congruent to that field:

*Habitus* is second nature, knowing how to 'walk the walk' and 'talk the talk' in relation to a particular field, how to play the game. It's 'the way we do things here'; what one eats, how one holds oneself, how one dresses, one's tastes, preferences and expectations concerning life chances (Tranter, 2007, p.4).

The ownership of this particularised *habitus* arising from the embodied ownership of cultural capital gives the bearer a 'feel for the game' that allows the theatregoer to understand the unwritten rules of behaviour, comportment, ritual and appropriate discourse. This lends a sense of entitlement to the space, leading to a 'natural' way of behaving, and a sense of feeling 'at home'.

Audience members at the Royal Court have at once contributed to, understood and fitted into the Royal Court's *doxa*; they fit into the behaviour, knowing how to act within the space as if it is a natural way to behave. This is because the *doxa* of the Royal Court are congruent with the *doxa* of other social spaces with which the audience members are familiar. And they see this as a social space, one that they (and not the staff or the actors) have ownership of; it is not congruent with the lecture theatre, it isn't here to enlighten them; nor is it congruent with the church and a spiritual, uplifting experience. It's a place of entertainment and they are here to have a laugh and enjoy themselves, to have a good night out.

This evolution of *doxa* at the Royal Court, led by the audience, is seen in an interview with performer Davy Edge, where he talks about audiences becoming increasingly involved with the Royal Court's first ever show under the current management. According to Edge, audiences on succeeding nights of the first run of *Brick up the Mersey Tunnels* in 2006 became increasingly involved (Hall, 2011), shouting out from the seats and participating in 'banter'. This voluble, physical and visceral engagement continued and has since become part of the *doxa*, even the hallmark, of the theatre. This engagement with what is on stage is talked about in detail in the next chapter, but is not just about the play and the players; it marks the development of a culture that is unique to the Royal Court, Liverpool that has been allowed and encouraged by staff and performers, and developed by audiences themselves. As Scollen (2008, p.3) puts it, 'audience members...interact with each other, which informs them of how to act as social beings



at the Theatre, how to act toward the theatrical performance and its cultural commentary, and how to act as human beings who operate as part of a collective’.

The new social rules that have formed in the *doxa* of the Royal Court audience are around informality, friendliness, enjoyment and *laissez-faire*. Audience members move around the auditorium more, before and to some extent during performances, facilitated by the auditorium also acting as bar, cabaret space and dining room. They socialise more, both within their social groups and with strangers. This social space is in stark contrast to Bourdieu’s identification of ‘icy solemnity’ (2010, p.26) in major theatres, and indeed different to other experiences of theatregoing in the field of Liverpool theatre, and this provides a locus for the congregation of a working class *habitus*.

## Conclusion

Drawing on empirical and qualitative research, this chapter has examined the relationship between participants’ *habitus* and the environment of the Royal Court, to discover how the particular *habitus* fits so successfully with the environment, and what signs the Royal Court and the people who attend it receive (and indeed transmit) that enable a fit with their *habitus* that enables them to feel at home. Even before theatregoers enter this environment, they have a relationship with theatre, not only the Royal Court, but with the concept of theatre itself, embodied in their *habitus*. Many also have a sense of where a particular theatre fits in the field. Signs such as marketing messages help reassure potential theatregoers about their congruent *habitus*. The theatre environment itself is reassuring and welcoming. The environment can be seen as being constituted of two main parts: the physical environment – the building, its place in the city, the theatre’s public spaces including the layout of the auditorium – but also the social space, that is, how this communal setting is inhabited by its audience and others who create its atmosphere, its conventions and rituals. At the Royal Court, these things result in an ambience

in which the overriding *doxa* and the underlying conventions, differ from other theatregoing spaces.

Audience members who took part in the empirical research felt that the Royal Court was different from other theatres in the field, that it was more homely, more relaxed, and even, as interviewee Joyce put it, 'cosy'. Participants could often identify elements that contributed to them feeling more at home; these included the more informal dress code, the food, and the staff. The more contemporary empirical research (Creative Research, 2007; Scollen, 2008; Bunting et al., 2008) suggests a range of anxieties people express about arts attendance, such as dress code, etiquette, how the process works, and who other attenders will be – in other words, concerns about the hidden rules and conventions, and about the *habitus* of other theatregoers. In the case of some attenders at the Royal Court, Liverpool, there was an awareness that some of these rules were a reflection of the separating mechanism of theatre, weapons used in the struggle to gain capital in the field. Examples are Joyce and Sarah, each of whom chose to flout the dress code of more 'snooty' theatres in order to subvert the relationship between dress and elitism. Other participants felt that they should conform to a dress code even though they were not clear what the dress code was, in order to not feel out of place or betray their lack of belonging. That is to say, agents in the field appear aware of the subtle signs and manifestations (tangible and non-tangible) telling them that theatre is or is not their field; they are aware of others with what they perceive to be the correct *habitus* and who are like or not like them, and are concerned that their *habitus* will betray their lack of acceptable cultural capital; some even have a concern that their own *habitus* may unconsciously exclude others.

The Royal Court counters some of those fears by giving theatregoers a sense of ownership, palpable in the newspaper story that quotes audience members as saying 'this is our place'. Some of this is through accidents of the building in its shabby accessibility; some have been

intentional decisions to create the theatre as a social space, a space with more in common with the historical field of music hall or cabaret than with a space of valorised, 'legitimate' theatre. The Royal Court has rejected many of the rules of legitimate theatre spaces, not least by explicitly inviting into its space those with low cultural capital who are not looking for a transcendent or educational experience, but rather a social experience, 'a good night out'. It has replaced traditional conventions with a new set of rules and expectations that have become socially legitimised by the players in the field, especially the audience members themselves. Some of these customs, such as eating and drinking in the theatre space, are intentional strategies of the management. Others, like breaking the fourth wall, have been encouraged by the theatre's creative team following their success in the first Royal Court show, and have developed and evolved. And others, like dress codes and audience engagement, have been developed unconsciously by the audience members themselves, with the support of staff, and are congruent with the customs of other social spaces used by working class people, both contemporary (the social club, the bingo hall, the party) and historic (the music hall). The employment of staff and performers with local accents and the attraction of working class audiences means that working class people enter a space staffed with people like themselves, to be entertained by people like themselves, who allow them to behave like themselves, alongside people like themselves. Thus working class audience members can feel 'at home' in a theatre space, a space that may otherwise have been assumed to make them feel conscious of a lack of capital. Consequently, those who may feel like a 'fish out of water' in a valorised, 'legitimate' theatre space, can 'follow their own social "nature"' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p,90) and instead feel like a 'fish in water', taking 'the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127). A theatregoer with a working class, Liverpool *habitus* in the Royal Court is the one that is dominant and at home. How that is reflected and supported by the repertoire and what capitals are at play in this world is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter 6. Capitals at play: The city in the theatre

For Bourdieu (1986), a capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it (Wacquant, 2007, p.7).

The last chapter explored the physical and social environment of the Royal Court, Liverpool to discover its relationship with a working class *habitus*. This chapter follows the audience into the auditorium to discover what is on stage in order to understand the repertoire and its relationship to the capitals at play in the field of theatregoing at the Royal Court. The main focus of the chapter is exploring the themes and tropes that are utilised within the shows at the Royal Court, and how they might relate to a working class audience in Liverpool. These tropes are exploited by the Royal Court's creative and marketing teams, but also by audience members

themselves, as forms of cultural capital. First though, it is useful to explore what is on stage from the perspective of Bourdieu's discussion of a working class aesthetic.

### **Plots and identification**

Bourdieu suggests a working class audience preference for 'plots that proceed logically and chronologically toward a happy end', and a wish to 'identify with [...] simply drawn situations or characters' (2010, p.24). Plots at the Royal Court are generally straightforward and chronological; even where devices like flashback are used such as in *YNWA*, where the story then proceeds chronologically from the historical point of departure to the present day, at which point the show ends. TripAdvisor contributor Y Bwychan appreciates this about *Hitchiker's Guide to Fazakerley*: 'There were plenty of gags [...] and the show was definitely hilarious, and the plot easy to follow'.

In terms of identification, protagonists are working class and, as discussed in Chapter 4, often defined in terms of their low-skilled, blue collar occupations (taxi drivers, cleaners, council workers, shop assistants, beauty technicians), and settings are often the workplace or the night out. However, identification at the Royal Court goes beyond the identification of audience members with characters, as may happen at any theatre. There is also an identification of audience members with actors, and this is related to 'form'.

In discussing music hall, Bailey (1994, p.148) talks about 'a possessive "claiming"' of performers (and their material) that goes beyond the concept of 'identification'. The ability of actors to 'break character' and speak to the audience directly is paradoxically a part of this sense of identification. On one level it might break identification, stopping the audience member identifying with the 'reality' of the character, as the artifice of the character is revealed. On the contrary, Bailey, discussing this in historical terms in relation to the music hall, suggests it may do the opposite:

In breaking role, the performer becomes most obviously accessible to the audience as himself or herself. Yet far from destroying the [...] character to whom the performer returns, the characterization may be strengthened through the revelation of the self that is invested in the role. This is a more privileged implication in the act of performance than that of the theatre, where the audience is privy to the performance as auditor/spectator who overhears the action or looks through the 'fourth wall' of the conventional stage set. In the music-hall, the shifts in and out of role and self, artifice and autobiography, allowed the audience to see, as it were, the joins in the performance (1994, p.144).

In addition, at the Royal Court, it enables the audience to identify directly with the actors themselves. This is particularly important to remove the preconception of the actors as *bourgeois* or 'la-di-dah'. This was referred to by interviewee Angela, who had talked about her perception of actors being 'very posh, "sweetie, darling"'. For Angela, actors, and the possibility of acting, was so remote, she felt 'as if you have to be touched with a magic wand to do it'. This is in contrast to the Royal Court experience, where audience members have a proprietorial sense that the actors and indeed the theatre in some sense belongs to them, that is evident for instance in the calling for the reinstatement of some of the old 'regulars' on TripAdvisor. The on-stage relationship is reinforced by actors having a drink with audience members after each show, a usual and planned part of the night, which is also appreciated by TripAdvisor contributors. This combination of an intimate on-stage relationship and a real life connection, as well as a sense of 'knowing' actors not only from play after play but also from television, creates a complex relationship with the real and the artificial.

The Royal Court is much more analogous to music hall here than theatre; the 'joins' in the performance referred to by Bailey ('the shifts in and out of role and self, artifice and

autobiography') are very much evident. Related to this is appreciation for the actors themselves, which is certainly for their skill and versatility in putting across the story, but also for their familiarity, accessibility and authenticity. This is important in class terms:

the working class world is one that is organised around the reality principle: that things are real and real in their consequences so that they demand that individuals 'get real'; address themselves to the world in a manner that does not deny, in its expressivity, the experience that the deep-rooted dispositions of the habitus emblemize. It is a world in which being is prioritized over seeming (Charlesworth, 2000, p.226).

### **The tropes utilised by the Royal Court, Liverpool**

There are two major tropes central to the work presented at the Royal Court, Liverpool, and in many ways they are related to this sense of identification. The first trope is comedy, itself bound up with a 'Scouse' identity. Comedy and 'Scouseness' permeate nearly all of the work presented at the theatre, as was seen in the season of shows presented in

Table 1. The second trope discussed is participation, which has grown to be important in all of the Royal Court's work. The types of comedy used and their enjoyment by audience members are discussed, before 'Scouse' as a concept and its relationship with a class identity is examined in more detail, followed by an examination of how participation is experienced at the Royal Court. This is summarised in order to identify the capitals at play.

As well as drawing on the expertise of writers on comedy, Scouse and participation and their relationship to class, the chapter also draws on the empirical research undertaken for this study. This is largely the field visits and thick descriptions from attendance at each show at the theatre during the 2013-14 season, supported by qualitative research into the views and experiences of

audience members (focus groups, interviews and TripAdvisor contributions). The chapter starts by examining the Royal Court's repertoire and its relationship with comedy.

## **Humour and comedy**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, comedy is always emphasised by the Royal Court in its marketing; and Liverpool's claimed relationship to comedy and thus the audience's ability to identify with it is emphasised too. Comedy is embedded in the Royal Court's repertoire, every show is a comedy. In the press, regular performer Eithne Brown defines 'a Royal Court show' as 'a lot of fun for audiences, with characters that they will immediately identify with' (High, 2009). This emphasis on comedy and identification by the theatre is at least in part about emphasising accessibility and making the theatre seem other than an elitist pastime.

Liverpool's sense of humour is part of its self-mythology, but is also an aspect of the mythic Liverpool character that persists outside Liverpool: 'The most positive "cultural knowledge" of Scousers is their friendliness and comedic qualities' according to Boland (2010, p.358). Comedy, the deliberate honing of humour for performance, is an extension of this sense of humour, and Liverpool has long been linked with comedians, from Tommy Handley through Royal Court saviour Ken Dodd, Paul O'Grady to current favourite John Bishop. Commentators link the sense of humour and its performativity with the dockers (Dudgeon, 2011), their 'wit and humour' used as a form of bonding and group identity (Belchem, 2006, p.46), making humour inextricably linked with 'Scouseness' and a Scouse performativity or *habitus*. Comedy is also seen as integral to an enculturated working class aesthetic according to both Bourdieu (2010) and later John McGrath (1989, p.54). Bourdieu's catalogue of aesthetic elements preferred by working class audiences embraces both form and content, including a 'less euphemised' form, 'plain speaking', and 'hearty laughter'; similarly, McGrath identifies 'directness', comedy, and 'effect' (constant engagement and 'clear results') as important to a working class enjoyment of theatre.



Bourdieu sees this as a working class 'honesty' (as opposed to the purposeful aesthetic distancing of the middle classes) and a realism in relation to the prevailing social conditions.

Comedy is fundamental to the Royal Court under its current management. Fearon and Miller's first use of the Royal Court was hosting their Rawhide Comedy Club in the basement bar (Rawhide Comedy Club, 2012). Their first theatre production there in 2006 was Allt and Kirby's *Brick Up the Mersey Tunnels*, a comedy about Liverpool separatism which the theatre credits with 'creating a new theatre audience hungry for accessible, quality entertainment in their home city' (Christie, 2012). Its pantomime style, Liverpool-chauvinism, use of local actors and broad comedy set the tone to what was to follow.

## Comedy of inclusion

According to some critics, plays at the Royal Court are 'too formulaic, the characterisation baldly stereotypical, and much of the humour wouldn't be out of place in the crudest standup routine' (Hickling, 2009a). Hickling is reviewing the sell out and oft-repeated *Night Collar*, although his description, albeit somewhat condescending, could be about most Royal Court shows with their ribaldry and irreverence. Rather than this rude, crude, stereotypical approach being the failure suggested by Hickling, it seems to be what the theatre is aiming for and its audiences enjoy, and the crudeness is not just purposeful but is functional; as suggested by Bourdieu, it satisfies 'the taste for and sense of revelry, the plain speaking, and hearty laughter' which 'liberate' and upset convention (2010, p.26). A variety of comedic forms are used, and it is worth looking at these and their functions in more detail.

In Christmas show *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley*, *double entendres* such as 'that's a nice shiny helmet. I'll give it a polish later' and euphemisms such as having 'Klingons on your starboard bow' upset what may be assumed to be the convention of polite *bourgeois* theatre.

They also depend on a shared reference point, further breaking down the barrier between audience and performers, and trade on the 'cleverness' of 'getting it', of decoding the *double entendre*. In this way they bring audience members together with the performers, and moreover invite them to collude in something they know to be tasteless, but are guilty of enjoying despite themselves. The *double entendre* itself is a form of distinction, distinguishing those who 'get it' from those who don't, and also those who want to be part of such humour and those who do not.

In *Once a Catholic*, the function of *double entendres*, such as the rhyming slang joke featuring J Arthur Rank, is slightly different, and often represents a sort of surreptitious defiance to the authority and sensibilities of the nuns who rule the school, a subversive ability to laugh at them without them knowing. Standing up to authority, and subversion when this cannot be achieved directly is appreciated elsewhere too: in *Lennon*; there is a round of applause when the Lennon character refuses to apologise for saying The Beatles were 'more popular than Jesus', and a bigger round of applause moments later when he makes a back-handed (non-)apology.

While rude humour is evident throughout the repertoire, the archetypal show for ribaldry and the risqué in the 2013-14 season was, as its title would suggest, *Sex and the Suburbs*. The conceit of the show is a radio programme in which a series of people with sex-related personal problems ring up agony aunts played by ex-*Brookside* and West End actor Claire Sweeney and Royal Court regular Lindzi Germaine, with occasional input from a 'producer' played by Carl Patrick. The callers' situations are then played out in short sketches. This gives plenty of scope for verbal and physical comedy of a sexual nature, including some business with a range of suggestively-shaped foods such as cucumbers, baguettes and melons. There is also a comic monologue with 'Annie, Super Sexpert', who gets the people at the front of the audience to do the exercises with her, before 'selling' them a range of sex toys which she holds up:

‘The Donald Duck love beads. But they do take eight weeks to come. Not you love. You silly cow [...] To all my lovely lesbian ladies out there tonight [...] We know how much you love the dungarees!’ She holds some up. And announces a ‘Detachable gusset!’ It’s a raucous performance. People are crying laughing. There are ‘whoops’ when she mentions ‘fully working tools’. She is building up and building up. She asks for a drum roll. She gets one. Louder. Louder. And then...she unleashes a huge black dildo. ‘Here it is. The Rampant Roadster. Fashioned on TV’s Jeremy Clarkson. Not that he’s got a big cock. He just is one.’ There is huge laughter. ‘Shop in the Iceland. Buy one get one FREE! You buy one, you get one FREE!’<sup>9</sup> A woman in the audience is shouting ‘No! No!’ as if she can’t take any more. Annie takes the top off another vibrator. Applause when she switches it on, and great laughter when she says ‘they both come together’. ‘I like to call this one the David Cameron. Just because it’s a little dick’. Applause. She holds up nipple clamps to her chest. With a grin, she lowers them: ‘for the older ladies’. And then lowers them further, to suggest: ‘Testicle clamps. Girls!’ ‘YES!’ Shouts a woman in the audience. ‘To spice things up. Or just cos you fucking hate him.’ There is hilarity. Inevitably, on comes the *Shades of Grey* bondage cuffs and she puts them on. Even more inevitably, as she starts to shut up shop, she can’t open them again. She calls offstage: ‘Katie have you got a spare key?’ Rising panic: ‘Katie have you got a hacksaw?’ Louder still: ‘Katie will you call the fire brigade!’ She finishes on a desperate note as she mimes driving with her wrists cuffed together: ‘I only live up Edge Lane, it’s a straight road, I should be OK.’ She’s been superb. There are cheers and whistles. Annie, Super Sexpert, has stolen the show.

*Excerpt from thick description, Sex and the Suburbs, 2014.*

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<sup>9</sup> A reference to the Safestyle Windows advert

On the one hand, this can be seen as a liberating portrayal of a woman not only comfortable in her sexuality but willing to celebrate it. However it is also reminiscent of the 'discourse of sexually excessive behaviour ascribed to young working-class women' (2015, p.15) noted by Adiseshiah. More than that, 'Annie, Super Sexpert' could be seen as the embodiment of Skeggs's 'loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting, hen-partying woman' (2005, p.965) in her almost Rabelaisian sexual freedom. There is though an important difference. 'Annie' is not 'pathologising' her class or her gender, in the sense that the audience is in no way invited to find her disgusting, but rather to join in and enjoy her sexuality, to collude with her and to some extent enjoy their own, to demonstrate their own sexual knowledge; without their collusion in creating the 'hen-party' atmosphere, the act would not be so funny. 'Annie' is played and written by women with working class backgrounds, and at the Royal Court, she is enjoyed by a largely working class audience at least in part made up of hen-partying women. This is not then the 'middle-class voyeurism' that Adiseshiah, drawing on Hume (2008) calls 'prole porn', and which is offered in theatres elsewhere (2015, p.12); it is not offering the working classes up 'as a spectacle for consumption' to the middle classes (Adiseshiah, 2015, p.23), and nor is it a parody, a *bourgeois*-eye view of the proletariat. Instead, it is a celebratory and inclusive portrayal of the 'unrestrained, hedonistic working class' (Skeggs, 2005, p.975).

While there is a danger that portrayals such as this represent working class women's collusion in their own subjugation, this display of sexual and comic freedom is also a liberation, allowing working class women access to the same 'realistic hedonism' (Charlesworth, 2000, pp.222-226) as working class men. 'Annie' demonstrates 'a practical sense of solidarity with those who share one's dispositions, space and fate, [...] that is an adaptation to and defence against conditions of cultural dispossession and economic marginality'. What is being played out here then is the dilemma of working class women, who have to choose between an open and thus *de facto* transgressive sexuality (because to discuss sexuality is not feminine), or of further narrowing the

range of representation available to them. While the character of 'Annie' is stereotypical and uncritical, it is still a challenge to the restrictive discourse of women. What is played out in both *Sex and the Suburbs* and in *Dirty Dusting* is a potentially liberating sexuality, one that is not confined to young women but includes middle aged and older women, that is not often seen elsewhere. This doesn't vindicate the portrayals, but it does make them much more ambivalent, and perhaps liberating and powerful.



*Figure 16: Phallic physical fun in Sex and the Suburbs (2014)*

*Lindzi Germaine as Penny Crowe and Carl Patrick as Rory Reynolds. Production photos © Royal Court, Liverpool.*

*Sons of the Desert*, being based word for word on the Laurel and Hardy short film released in 1933, does not have much room for *risqué* comedy. However, presumably to extend the evening (the film, and therefore the play, runs at 68 minutes which is short for a show), the first half is a variety show, and, unlike the film, is set in a putative Liverpool music hall. While the audience appear mostly bemused by this, they do enjoy the *risqué* comedy of George Formby song *In My Little Snapshot Album* and the innuendo-laden Lancashire chimney sweep's song *I'll be Up Your Way Next Week*:

The lodging house I live in – it drives me off my dot  
The landlady there she's very nice, but a smokey flue she's got.  
This morning she came up to me as I was coming down  
And she said 'Mister, can you sweep my flue?' I said 'I'm off to town.  
But I'll be up your way next week, I'll be up your way next week  
(lyrics sourced from The Mudcat Café, 2008).

Again, the innuendo is not just enjoyed for its own sake, but also for the sense of mischief it provides. Similarly, on TripAdvisor, contributor 'Ipitman' clearly relishes 'some of the more shocking parts' of *Once a Catholic*, which s/he says 'had everyone laughing and gasping' (2014). Here, and even more so in the *Variety Lunches*, there is an enjoyment of what Friedman calls 'wilful political incorrectness', which represents both a willingness 'to give comedians a "comic licence" to shock', and an unpretentious rebellion against those who try to 'set limits on their humour' (2014, p.84). Friedman also suggests this is part of the defiance of working class audiences (p.81). Charlesworth recognises this as a 'transgression of dominant censorships, especially in sexual matters' which he sees as 'a central trait of working class speech' (2000, p.227). In other words, the rudeness and crudeness being played out on stage is reflecting the openness and transgression of working class speech back to the audience.

Not everyone enjoys the rude comedy of course. Also on TripAdvisor, keithydee (2014) felt *Once a Catholic* 'seemed to include swearing just for the sake of it', and John H objected to the 'crudity' of *Sex and the Suburbs*: 'quite possibly the crudest piece of "entertainment" it's ever been my misfortune to witness' (2014). In one of the focus groups, Sarah, a teacher, mentions her discomfort while watching *Special Measures*:

Sarah: You see, I thought the sexual content in it was getting a bit close to the bone. [Susan: yeah it was, definitely] You know I didn't, it didn't offend me, but because I'd booked on behalf of so many other people [Maria: yes], and all

Maria: You felt responsible for them

Sarah: Yes, I was sitting there at one point, you know when [actor] Paul Broughton gets his bum out at right the beginning, and I just sat there and I looked along the row and I thought 'now, ooh, er, ok' (laughs).

For many though, this discomfort appears to be part of the fun.

Another aspect of so-called crude humour is of course profanity, swearing and slang. Swearing has several functions: it is often rude; it is daring and challenges *bourgeois* convention, especially in the theatre which may be associated in people's minds (however untrue that may be) with more polite language; and it is part of the 'real', 'this obligation to be natural, expressive and open' as Charlesworth puts it (2000, p.226). The openness and 'expressiveness of popular language' (Bourdieu, 2010, p.26) helps to break down the barrier between stage and audience, and the power relationship between the entertainer and the entertained:

There is a positive response to the swearing, and a character's exhortation to 'Burn 'er face off!' gets a big laugh. The lad in front of me keeps burying his head in what seems to be amused and embarrassed recognition.

*Excerpt from thick description, Bouncers, 2013.*

Swearing can at once be aggressive, robust and inclusive, it is part of speaking a common language in this working class world of realism, 'in which being is prioritized over seeming' (Charlesworth, 2000, p.226).

A similar function is served by slang, breaking down power boundaries and providing identification through the 'ordinariness' of shared language. Bourdieu called slang 'the form par excellence of "popular speech"' (1991, p.94), and it is used to great effect at the Royal Court, as here in this reference to a *Star Trek* character, *Star Trek* being one of the many texts on which *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley* draws in its space pastiche:

'I feel like a hooer' [vernacular for whore] gets a huge laugh, which is further protracted by [actor Michael] Starke corpsing, (I suspect on purpose) and holding the pause, before the punchline comes:

'You mean Uhuru'.

*Excerpt from thick description, The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley, 2014.*

The audience enjoys the swearing, but also likes the predictability of the jokes, and the ability to acknowledge the artifice. Moreover they enjoy the chance to participate, to enter into the game. This is discussed in more detail in the final part of this chapter.

Work at the Royal Court generally absents the *bourgeois* 'lah-di-dah' from the stage; where 'posh' characters or those in authority do appear, their function is to be sent up or resisted, as



with the Tory minister in *Special Measures* or the male boss in *Dirty Dusting*. In his paper on pantomime in the Welsh Valleys, Coupland calls this 'symbolic retribution' (2009, p.11). His paper describes 'the interaction [which] creates a space for joint participation and fills that space with a vernacular Valleys style of speech and an ideological alignment against 'posh'' (Coupland, 2009, p.10), that is reminiscent of what is happening at the Royal Court, except of course in vernacular Scouse. Skeggs, drawing on Willis, uses the word 'doubling' to describe the function of the 'piss-take' in a field of power (Skeggs is referring here to the actual rather than the staged workplace):

the piss-take is not just resistance to dull compulsion at work, but rather, a way of doubling; what is taken to be real is simultaneously maintained as fictitious, but also as a practical cultural form, in which the variable and ambiguous nature of labour power is articulated (2005, p.975).

In other words, 'doubling' through the 'piss-take' is a more problematic and ambivalent concept than the retribution described by Coupland. Dicks (2008, p.448) suggests doubling 'allows workers to maintain a focus on the constructedness of their reality and their ability to distance themselves from it, as well as on an understanding of their own exploitation'. This recognition of exploitation is however usually tacit in Royal Court shows, neither directly discussed nor resolved. The exception in the 2013-14 season was Markham's polemical *Special Measures*, which involves the cast taking direct action against a self-serving Tory minister. However the resolution is in farce and comedy rather than offering a practical or political answer; as local blog Made Up (2014) puts it, '*Special Measures* may rouse the crowds, but ultimately offers little solution'.

Sometimes jokes are also reflexive at the expense of the show or the theatre. Again, there are old jokes and obvious jokes:

[The MC] tells an old joke about the food being served at the Theatre ('2000 flies can't be wrong'), and there is a laugh that seems to be of recognition of the joke as much as at his chutzpah for seeming to criticise the management.

*Excerpt from thick description, Sons of the Desert, 2013.*

These jokes have a function, with audience members enjoying the predictability of the payoffs. Interviewee Joyce points this out about *Scouse of the Antarctic*, which she felt was 'hilarious': 'I heard some people in the pub who didn't like it because of the old jokes. [I thought] "Don't you think they know that?"' (2014). This 'knowingness' (Bailey, 1994) is an important part of the cohesion based on a shared sophistication that in itself produces distinction. Indeed, Joyce expressed a sophisticated appreciation of comedy, enjoying the distinction of understanding 'difficult' comedy that others didn't get, such as deadpan comic Milton Jones. (However she hated the more *avant-garde Shockheaded Peter* (Everyman hire of the Royal Court, 1998). 'Oh Christ, it was dreadful! [...] Nearly 90% of the audience were *Shockheaded Peter* fans who kept saying the punchline!' How did that make you feel? I asked her. 'Like I was right and they were wrong!')

Part of the relationship audience members have with the real and the meta, of knowing it is a show and wanting to be on the inside, is the relationship with mistakes, which audiences relish rather than see as a disruption to their suspension of disbelief. Actors often 'corpse' on stage at the Royal Court, in other words are forced to come out of character as they can't control their laughter, either as a reaction to a mistake or because they can't help sharing in the humour of their own or another's joke. In other theatres this can happen in the pantomime where the artifice of the performance is acknowledged, but rarely in other shows where it would be frowned upon as disrupting the deceit of the performance. At the Royal Court these are a

regular part of the entertainment and are part of the 'knowingness' of the reality of the performance, as in this incident in *Bouncers*:

Later, in reaction to the line 'I'd shag a frog if it stopped hopping', [actor] Mickey Starke corpses slightly, and the audience loves it. There seems to be no particular wish to suspend disbelief, but an enjoyment of the fact it is a performance, and a wish to get beyond the artifice of the performance, to acknowledge what we all know is happening, to join in and to share a good night out with those on stage.

*Excerpt from thick description, Bouncers, 2013.*

This love of the impromptu, of the 'real', actually leads to falsity, for instance the prevalence of false corpsing; in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley*, the hooer/Uhuru joke gets a huge laugh, and this is protracted by actor Mickey Starke corpsing, in what appears to be a deliberate device to hold the pause and keep the laughter going before he delivers the punchline. Real mistakes are also not just tolerated but welcomed, as performer Davy Edge recounts:

The Royal Court is like the old Shakespeare Theatre [in Liverpool] which sadly burnt down, it's set out like a cabaret theatre downstairs. The audience become intimate with the show! Normally, you'd do your damndest to hide any mistakes; you want to keep them hidden but for something like *Brick Up [the Mersey Tunnels]* though you let it roll, the audience love it, the audience come back specifically for it, looking for – anyone who's going to go, we just let it run (Hall, 2011).

### **Comedy of exclusion**

As well as the theatre repertoire which has been expanded upon here, the Royal Court also has the Wednesday afternoon *Variety Lunch Club* (extracts from a thick description of a visit were given in the last chapter). This a monthly event which has a distinct form. Audiences can watch a

crooner and a comic while they eat; food is, inevitably, a bowl of scouse. This is taken from the thick description following my visit to the *Variety Lunch* featuring Liverpool comedian Mickey Finn who had also been involved in the show that re-opened the Royal Court in 2001:

He is introduced and there is an audible and even palpable ripple of anticipation. On to the stage comes a short, stocky, slightly hunched, pugilist of a man. He has clipped, thinning grey hair and wears a suit. The applause is huge. He looks round at the *Once a Catholic* set, nods his head, and looks back round at the audience, before looking behind him again. He takes his time. He nods. They titter. He looks. Finally, he faces the audiences, pauses, and, in a gravelly, rasping, hard-edged, guttural, north-Liverpool accent, spits out: 'First time I've worked in a convent'. And the audience roar.

He follows this with a joke about Polish people living in Liverpool's Kensington, and then a Scouse-parodying one about going to court ('Years ago, the main courts were in Dale Street. If you had nothing to do before the Winey opened, you could [go along] and see the shoplifters'). This is quickly followed by a going-to-confession joke comparing the sacrament with modern-day shopping (there's a sign outside the confessional: 'eight items or less'; and the priest serves 'low fat communion' called 'I can't believe it's not Jesus'). He follows up with a misogynist joke, in which 'One of them girls that walks up and down [the red light district's] Upper Parliament Street', complains of assault. 'When did you know you'd been interfered with?' asks the police officer. 'When the cheque bounced,' she replies. And everyone laughs.

The jokes come thick and fast. They feature an archetypal, white, male Scouser who likes a drink and a fight and isn't averse to a little light theft. He lampoons 'posh' accents, talking of south Liverpool's 'Mather Havenue', and saying 'Blundellsaarrrnds'

for Blundellsands. He builds up joke after joke, and there is real skill in the way the set is put together. The audience are laughing hysterically, and repeating punchlines to each other. Not all jokes are original ('I think the ice cream man's topped himself'), but nobody minds. He plays on nostalgia: 'It's not the same now girls, is it', he appeals to the women in the audience. 'No' they say, apparently happy to be complicit. He uses old Liverpool vernacular: in one anecdote, all his mates have 'done the off', pursued by policemen from Saint Anne Street police station. There is a joke at the expense of retired manager of Manchester United Alex Ferguson. There are more jokes of normalised deviant behaviour, such as 'pinching lead'. The audience love it. Far from being excluded by the misogyny, the women seem to laugh loudest at these jokes, to want to make the point they are included, they do have a sense of humour, they can laugh at themselves. After all, everyone's being laughed at here, aren't they?

He lampoons foreign accents: 'Who chinned you?' asks the pub landlord of a prone Chinese man after a brawl. 'How you know my name?' answers the man in broken English. Going 'over the water' to the Wirral is seen as travelling to another country: 'Bring any ciggies back?' He purposely mispronounces names of nearby boroughs and towns to emphasise their remoteness, their Otherness. 'Going to Wig-ann', Wigan, less than an hour away on the M58, is not only another country but a step back in time: 'the motorway's cobbled'. The people portrayed live up to age-old clichés, such as the sign on the Wigan van: 'No pies left in this van overnight'<sup>10</sup>. The Wigan accent is different and this is funny; one local gets 'barred out [of the pub] for farting. Farting

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<sup>10</sup> People from Wigan are known as the pie-eaters, a soubriquet that is said to have originated when people of Wigan were starved back to work after the General Strike. It has endured largely as a pejorative used by football fans, although more recently it has been reappropriated by Wiganers through their Pie Eating Contest.

with the manager'. The message is clear, others, for instance those who are not from Liverpool, are inherently funny.

*Excerpt from thick description, Variety Lunch, 2014.*

The act then is a series of well timed, well told, well-rehearsed and incredibly old-fashioned observational jokes that are parochial and encompass a range of prejudices. They refer constantly to loved local landmarks, particularly those that have now disappeared or changed in connotation, and almost always in the north end of Liverpool. One such is Great Homer Street Market or 'Greaty', which up until late in the last century was the twice a week gathering place of much of north and some of south Liverpool, where everything was sold, from piles of shoes paired by elastic bands to tinned food with no labels, with second hand clothes and china ornaments sold on old bedspreads on the ground, but which is now threatened with closure. The only south Liverpool reference is the one to 'posh' 'Mather Havenue'. Many more references are to pubs and clubs, especially Liverpool institutions like 'the world famous Grafton'<sup>11</sup> and the mythic Yates's Wine Lodge (there are 'oohs' of recognition when he mentions these), and The Blob, Tess Riley's and Smokey Mo's, more modern institutions that are achieving their own mythic status for opening early, serving late and selling cheap beer with karaoke. They are treated as types, we know what they are, and we recognise the people who use them. There is reminiscence: 'What's happened to all the pubs? The Honkey Tonk, Scotland Road? The Westmoreland Arms?' he asks, to a wave of nostalgic recognition in the audience.

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<sup>11</sup> The Grafton Rooms was built as a dance hall in the 1920s. It became (in)famous as a nightclub that started a 'Grab a Granny' night in the 1970s.

The jokes themselves play up to Scousers' self-mythologising of their own stereotypes, for instance as lawbreakers and drinkers, as fighters, as proud people who have to save face. Jokes are sometimes updated, to encompass new incoming ethnic groups like the Polish, and new-ish social phenomena such as Hoodies, but this is really window dressing; the types are the same, and how we treat them is the same. Finn is quick at encompassing what is around him (referring back to the set: 'Is that a crematorium there? I thought me ears were burning') and reacting to the audience, but otherwise they are the same old jokes with the same old targets.

Through his act, Finn tells us he is a Catholic ex-docker, 'born and bred' in St Sylvester's parish, Scotland Road. For many, Scotland Road is the heart of Liverpool, a once thriving arterial route boasting big shops and a pub on every corner, so famously busy that it lent its name worldwide to ships' passageway used by stewards. Moreover, docker is a real job, combining masculinity with the wily sense of survival that was needed in an unregulated and insecure industry. The docker is not only from a time of fighting to survive, but also part of the 'real' of the industrial, commerce and trade, as opposed to the post-industrial call centre service industry. Similarly, being a working class Catholic is part of the mythology of this city of Liverpool, built in part on Irish immigration, a city romantically full of descendants of people fleeing the Irish Famine who never had enough money for the second stage of the journey to New York. The working class, Scouse Catholic is reflected in popular culture, from Carla Lane's *Liver Birds* and *Bread* to Jimmy McGovern's episodes of *Brookside*. Mickey Finn has all of these credentials and he wants to share them, to claim his authenticity and his right to be here; he embodies the Liverpool of a mythic time and place. This is performance as performativity, not just performativity of the man, but performativity of the city itself.

Finn trades on his embodiment of the Scouser, as the white, working class, male and very masculine, Catholic ex-docker. In its misogyny, its racism, its xenophobia and its parochialism,

The *Variety Lunch* is an atypical extreme rather than typical of the Royal Court repertoire.

However the representation of Scouseness itself permeates the theatre's work, making it 'the spiritual home of stage Scouseness' (Jones, 2008).

### **Comedy and Scouse**

In 2013-14, the shows presented in the main repertoire were largely consistent with the theatre's stated aim, in that they were based on the 'unique' character of Liverpool, having 'a Liverpool theme', and employing a largely Liverpool cast and crew (Royal Court 2015). Of the nine shows in the season, seven were wholly set in Liverpool. Five of those (*YNWA*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley*, *Special Measures*, *Sex and the Suburbs*, and *Lennon*) were written as Liverpool shows, the first four commissioned by the Royal Court. *Lennon* was originally an Everyman show, radical at the time but having lost its bite (Hickling, 2010a); it is directed by writer and original Everyman director Bob Eaton. Two shows (*Ladies Day* and *Bouncers*) were not originally set in Liverpool, but for the Royal Court productions, local place names and events were substituted for the originals. There were two exceptions to this rule of local or localised. The first was *Once a Catholic*, in its original setting of London's Willesden in 1957. Its Catholic content would sit just as well in a retrospective Liverpool, so perhaps this was due to an attempt to broaden the repertoire under the theatre's first artistic director, or, more pragmatically, as it was a co-production with London's Tricycle Theatre and had to work there too. The second was *Sons of the Desert*, a live re-enactment of the Laurel and Hardy short film which was set in Los Angeles and Chicago. However, this re-enactment was preceded by the first act based on variety referred to earlier. This was set in a notional Liverpool theatre, the conceit being that it presented the sort of bill that Laurel and Hardy actually performed in in Liverpool.

The aim of the season was clearly to deliver what Merkin calls 'Scouse comedy' (2012, p.93).

However it is interesting to note that 2013-14 coincided with the appointment of the Royal



Court's first artistic director, Ken Alexander, who was later credited with broadening the Royal Court repertoire (Jones, 2014a) and taking it beyond Scouse (Made Up, 2014), which suggests an even more concentrated Scouse repertoire in previous years. However, his role only lasted for one season. These ideas, of Liverpool's 'unique' character, of Liverpool 'themes', and the concept of 'Scouse' and particularly its relationship with class, are more resilient at the Royal Court, and deserve some scrutiny.

### **Scouseness**

'Scouseness' means much more than being related to the geographical space of Liverpool. In his book *Scouse, A Social and Cultural History* (2012), Crowley defines Scouseness as a sort of performative socio-cultural identity, 'not simply of Liverpool identity, but of Liverpool working class identity (embodied in the figure of the dockworker)' (p.107). More pejoratively, he suggests that Scouseness is part of what he terms 'The Liverpool cult', a mythologising self-referential industry that grew up in the 1960s. Thus for Crowley, Scouseness goes beyond relating to an accent or dialect, and is an embodiment of an identity that is not only related to place but is gendered and class-based; it could be called a Scouse *habitus*. The Scouse identity is constantly employed at the Royal Court, in punning show titles such as *Scouse of the Antarctic* and *Little Scouse on the Prairie*; in employment of local actors with not only a Scouse accent but a Scouse pedigree (Andrew Schofield who played Scully in the eponymous Liverpool television drama, Mickey Starke who was Sinbad in Liverpool soap *Brookside*, Mark Moraghan who was one of the eponymous Scousers featured in comedy *Harry Enfield's Television Programme*); of local front of house staff with local accents; in serving the dish of scouse from which Scousers get their name; in constant reference to local landmarks; even in the symbolic siting of the *Superlambanana* above the awning of the main entrance. The utilisation of the Scouse trope is

seen by the theatre as of central importance in successfully attracting and attaining not only a Scouse audience, but a working class audience.

The word 'scouse' has had a long relationship with Liverpool, the earliest example of its use in connection to the city being in 1797 according to Crowley (2012, p.xiii). This example concerned the dish rather than the people or the accent, and was in a report on a Liverpool poorhouse. The word itself is generally agreed to have come from Lobscouse, a sailor's stew, and for many years seems as much associated with ships as a particular geography: 'Lob's scouce [sic] is a dish that seems to vary in every vessel. Ours was made with small pieces of beef pork or salt fish mixed with mashed potatoes' (Lee, 1835). On dry land, 'Scouce' was served in English prisons and asylums as an alternative to gruel and broth, not only in Liverpool (Accounts and Papers, 1842, p.246) but for instance in Lancaster Asylum (Massachusetts, 1832) and Wakefield House of Corrections (Parliamentary Papers, 1845, p.20). Easy and cheap to make, outside the confines of institutions it can be assumed to have been a poor people's dish.

Poor people's dishes have equivalents the world over, and scouse has near neighbours including Irish stew and the 'hot pot' made famous in Lancashire, both of which are very similar in culinary terms. However, these local connections are rarely made, and it is to Norway, Holland and Germany that people of Liverpool look for the Scouse origin. Scouse connotes Liverpool's relationship with the sea and its identification with other worlds, with its sense of itself as cosmopolitan, as having an ability to draw in and accept and embellish the best from the world cultures it rubs up against, and as a distinctiveness to its neighbours. Like Liverpool, scouse looks to the world while it turns its back on England. It is a signifier of Liverpool, of class, and of difference. To eat and to cook scouse is a tradition, a lived link with the past, and a construct of what it is to be from Liverpool. Thus Scouse is not only bound up with poverty, but also signifies Liverpool's claim of 'difference' from Lancashire (of which it was actually administratively a part

until 1974), and with its claim as a world city. This 'difference' Liverpool claims to its near neighbours and indeed the rest of the nation is integral to its mythology and identity. Called 'Liverpool exceptionalism' by Belchem (2006), it is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The word 'scouse' gained further significance for Liverpool in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it acquired two new meanings: first, 'scouse' became the name for the dialect or so-called 'language' of Liverpool, and then the word became extended to 'Scousers' (pejoratively, people who ate – had to eat – scouse) to connote the people of Liverpool themselves. However, from the 1950s the accent itself became widely recognised and engrained (Belchem, 2006, p.xv; Crowley, 2012, p. 63), at least in part due to what Crowley (2012, p.63) calls the 'Scouse industry'. This was the intentional promotion of Liverpool, its accent and its people, as distinctive and 'other', separate from Lancashire, and distinct from the rest of the country. This became further reinforced in Liverpool and entrenched in the national arena in the 1960s by popular culture, television, film, and with the popularity of Liverpool performers such as Cilla Black and of course the Beatles.

The once pejorative 'Scouser' was then appropriated by the people of Liverpool and became the name identified with the people of the city, both externally and internally, deposing previous soubriquets such as 'Wackers', 'Dicky Sams', 'Liverpolitans', and to a large extent the more official 'Liverpudlians' (the last of which had become associated with Liverpool Football Club and could thus be seen as exclusionary to rival Everton fans). The Scouser identity was further cemented in the 1980s by comedian Harry Enfield's portrayal of *The Scousers* as black-moustachioed curly-haired lads saying 'dey do do dat, don't dey dough' (they do do that, don't they though) and urging everyone to 'kaaam down, kaaam down!' (calm down). Crowley (2012, p.110) points out that while a diversity of Scousers has been represented on TV, it is the stereotypes that endure. Consequently, 'originally enregistered as the linguistic marker of a geographic region, the language of Liverpool, latterly Scouse, became an expansive cultural

repository for the generation of images of a specific type of contemporary urban working class life' (Crowley, 2012, p.110).

As Crowley (2012) suggests, while the word 'Scouser' can be applied to anyone who comes from the city, the figure of the Scouser is almost exclusively portrayed as male, as white, and as working class. In *Scouse, A Social and Cultural History* (2012), Crowley discusses the masculinity of the Scouser, suggesting the figure became gendered because of the genesis of scouse mythology, formed mostly by men in the 1960s and '70s (p.75). (It could be argued that this is true of almost all identities in a patriarchal society, where 'Individuals basically are assumed to be male/men until proven otherwise, that is, until some obvious marker of conventional femininity is noted' (Lucal, 1999, p.783).) Crowley goes on to define Scouseness as a sort of performative socio-cultural identity, 'not simply of Liverpool identity, but of Liverpool working class identity (embodied in the figure of the dockworker)' (p.107). It could be argued then that the figure of the docker is the archetypal Scouser. While containerisation has almost seen the last of the dock workforce<sup>12</sup>, the mythic figure of the docker lives on, representing not only an occupation but an entire class and by extension a city. Characterised by self-reliance, fierce loyalty, sometime solidarity, and a wiliness born of a struggle to survive (sometimes through opportunistic petty theft), 'the dockers [...] came to define the working-class culture of Liverpool, crystallising the spirit of a time and place' (Charters, 2006).

While all dockers were male (except for a brief period in World War I according to Merseyside Maritime Museum, 2015) and presumably working class, not all dockers were white. Despite Liverpool's population including a wide range of ethnic origins - including the oldest black community in the country (Costello, 2001) and the oldest Chinese community in Europe (BBC,

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<sup>12</sup> According to Charters, 2006: 'at its height in the 1950s, about 25,000 dockers, worked on the Mersey. There are now 400'.

2006) – not to mention a very cosmopolitan view of itself in its self-presentation as a world city – it still presents itself as white, and the Scouser is almost exclusively portrayed as white; Belchem (2006, p.64) quotes Frost: ‘the notion of “scouseness” was, and still is, something Black Liverpudlians are excluded from’. Frost sees this racism as a British problem rather than one inherent to Liverpool.

In contrast, Liverpool women have had some visibility in its self-told history, featuring in the mythology and reflected in the language at different times, although often as distinct to the male Liverpudlian. Liverpool women were once called ‘Mary Ellens’ (particularly of female costermongers, according to Belchem (2006, p.49), and ‘shawlies’ (originally of hawkers, due to the Irish working class habit of shawl-wearing). In the 1950s and ’60s, Liverpool women became referred to in relationship to men rather than by their occupation, as ‘tarts’ (not intended as a profession or a reflection of character, but in fact an affectionate, generic but gendered term for a significant other – ‘how’s yer tart?’); and as ‘judies’, presumably the companions of Punch, who were commemorated in the 1960s’ Spinners’ folk song *The Liverpool Judies*, about the almost physical ties Liverpool sailors had to their ‘judies’ back home. More recently, the phenomenon of ‘WAGs’ (wives and girlfriends, usually of footballers) such as Colleen Rooney and Abbey Clancey, tabloid depictions of events such as Ladies Day at Aintree Racecourse, and television series such as *Desperate Scousewives*, have characterised Liverpool women as young, sexy, superficial, brash, overly made up (in orange fake-tan) and over-dressed – or scarcely dressed, as in artist Brian D. Hanlon’s *Sleeping Beauty* in Liverpool Museum (Figure 17: Original sketch for *Sleeping Beauty* by artist Brian D. Hanlon), which records the ‘chav’ female Scouser in rollers and pyjamas, presumably out doing her shopping. These images and thus the women they represent are to be laughed at rather than with, and treated with scorn; and they are difficult to detangle from class-based female identities. Most recently, the social media character ‘Scousebird’ has capitalised on and to some extent

subverted this image of Scouse women, creating a funny social media meme that combines Scouse characteristics such as aggression and a liberal view of theft with a concern for beauty products (ScouseBirdProbs, 2015), but reclaims Scouse as (also) female and with her own personality.



Figure 17: Original sketch for *Sleeping Beauty* by artist Brian D. Hanlon

*The design concept was in answer to a brief for Go Penguins 2009, a public art project in which artists submitted original designs based on a blank maquette of a penguin, similar to the Superlambanana project in the Cultural Capital year. Hanlon submitted several designs including Liverpool-centric ones such as this and a Sergeant Pepper-related design. The image refers to the 'chav' trend for wearing pyjamas and hair rollers in public. Hanlon's iconic statue was subsequently purchased for display by Merseyside Museums and Galleries.*

*Source: Artist's sketch. With permission.*

The staging of 'Scouse' and 'Scouseness' by the Royal Court then is not a portrayal of a city so much as of a white, working class *habitus* that happens to be bound up with a city. Royal Court

Scousers conform to the stereotypes of Scousers ‘famed for their humour, football, dockers and judies’ (Griffiths, in Belchem, 2006, p.47). They are football fans and club-goers, ladies-day wannabes who can’t afford their day at the races. They are taxi drivers, cleaners, council workers, shop assistants and bouncers. Where they subvert or transform their condition in the course of the drama, it is not through a realisation of their subjugation (as might have happened in the *Everyman* of the 1970s), but by luck (*Lucky Numbers* – nana wins the Lotto; *Funny Money* – Danny finds ‘two million quid’ on the bus; *Ladies Day* – finding a handbag with money and tickets enables an outing to the races), or more rarely by a wily subversion of the means of production turned to their own ends (*Dirty Dusting* – cleaners make money by setting up a chat line in the office from which they are being made redundant). In this they are wider than a city, they are tropes that can be recognised by working class people outside of the city.

Perhaps the most parochial and chauvinistic play of the Royal Court’s 2013-14 season is *YNWA*, named for the commonly-used acronym – and now social media hashtag – for *You’ll Never Walk Alone*, Liverpool Football Club’s crowd-sung, sentimental anthem to solidarity. The play is more or less a history of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) told in flashback by character Tia and her family. Tia’s name is itself an acronym, for ‘This is Anfield’, after the sign hung in the tunnel at the home ground of LFC, which Liverpool players touch in reverence as they walk on to the pitch before the match, and which is said to intimidate rival players. The Royal Court show is strung together with video footage of LFC games and events, and is played on a set that includes a bar; in many ways, it’s like watching the match in the pub with music and jokes thrown in. The audiences react as if they are fans at the game, waving their scarves and singing along; after one performance there was a spontaneous outpouring of song/chant *We Love You Liverpool, We Do* from the audience, who are clearly supporters. However, these communal performances of football and fandom are about much more than that. Williams (2001) points to the symbolic importance of football to supporters in Liverpool who ‘spent some of their greatest communal

moments' at matches, where 'the two football clubs acted as collective points of city communion, continuity and neighbourhood solidarity, especially for working class men' (p.101). There was of course a further symbolism as the show was on in March 2014, just as the new Hillsborough inquests were opening. The show represents a communal, class understanding of not only what it is like to be a Liverpool supporter but to be from Liverpool, and feeds into the idea of 'Liverpool exceptionalism'.

### **'Liverpool Exceptionalism'**

As mentioned above, 'Liverpool exceptionalism' is a phrase coined by Belchem (2006) to describe 'Liverpool's apartness [... which] is crucial to its identity' (p.xi). This sense of distinction, of being 'special' and different from (all) other places (Lees, 2011; Belchem, 2006; Crowley, 2012; Brown, 2000), from the frontier towns, from the rest of Lancashire, from the North West of England, and indeed from the rest of the country, is epitomised by the football chant 'We're not English we are Scouse!'. The separation of Scousers from their neighbours continues today, with those immediately outside Liverpool being called 'wools' (or 'woollybacks', presumably a reference to sheep, signifying a more pastoral lifestyle), and even those in the more far flung suburbs of the city being called 'plazzy Scousers' (plastic, artificial and imitation 'wannabe' Scousers not quite making the grade). Du Noyer describes Liverpool as 'the capital of itself, deeply insular, yet essentially outward looking' (2007, p.5). This insularity means that Liverpool is both perceived as, and perceives itself to be, what Brown (2000) calls 'a hermetically sealed social space', in which things happen that could only happen in Liverpool.

Within Liverpool, this distinction can feel like a badge of courage, an assertion of difference, of indifference to the rest of the country, of independence. For many, the Hillsborough campaign is emblematic of this mythology, of Liverpool people standing together in solidarity in the face of overwhelming opposition to fight for truth and justice. From outside Liverpool however, this



exceptionalism is often perceived negatively; Hume in 2003 calling it 'put-upon miserablist isolationism' (quoted in Belchem, 2006, p.xv), and others seeing Liverpool as 'wallowing in economic misfortune, excessive sentimentality and victim status' (Belchem, 2006, p.xvi). From the outside, there is a sense of beleagurement that can appear paranoid. Belchem catalogues a list of reasons why Liverpudlians may legitimately feel 'hard done by'. This includes the city's particular suffering during the Depression of the 1930s (p.50), and Liverpool being a special target in the May Blitz bombing raids which went unreported for strategic reasons (p.51). Most recently, Liverpool's refusal to accept what the police, tabloids like *The Sun* and some politicians said about fan behaviour and the apportionment of blame after the Hillsborough disaster and subsequent cover up has been seen in some quarters as a refusal of Liverpool people to accept responsibility, rather than as a fight for truth and justice or a class-based struggle against power. Awareness of this long-standing relationship with injustice has perhaps resulted in a self-deprecating humour, which both acknowledges and defends Liverpool's reputation, crystallised in Liverpool comedian Arthur Askey's: 'you've got to be a comic to live in Liverpool' (quoted in Belchem, 2006, p.50).

As seen in Chapter 4, this sense of uniqueness is used by the Royal Court to interpellate its audiences: 'The Royal Court has developed a unique style of theatre for Liverpool audiences...produced in Liverpool, starring Liverpool actors, written by Liverpool writers...' (Royal Court, 2015). As its publicity states, it does so through its repertoire, with shows like *YNWA*, *Sex and the Suburbs*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley*, the *Variety Lunches* and *Special Measures* presenting the Royal Court's version of Scouseness to include the Scouse character, Scouse comedy and wit, and a communal celebration of what it means to be Scouse. Having been hailed, audience members respond: 'I always have known how "different" we are and this production shows to all just how true that is' says Macca921 (2011) on local forum Red and White Kop; fellow audience member Parsons (2011), on Facebook, concurs: 'The thing that I

love the most is that they celebrate 'scouseness'. Can't imagine any other city being able to do the same'. Museum Education Officer Joyce agrees:

'Cause it's kind of nice that we have this place that celebrates us being Scouse, you know it might not, it might be something that some people look down on, but I'm very, very proud of it to be honest and I think, you know especially over things that have happened over the years I very much believe that we're in that thing of erm, what did it used to say on the big screen in town? 'Liverpool, erm, a city in England, but not of it', and I do very much feel that we're not like the rest of them.

Despite what is perceived in some quarters as a slight and undemanding repertoire and a narrow reflection of 'Scouse', the portrayal is sometimes disruptive; the Royal Court does challenge or play with the stereotype of the Scouser on occasion. For instance, in this thick description that depicts what is happening on stage in *YNWA* (2014):

And now the actors are Scousers, wearing the signifier of big wigs and moustaches as in *Harry Enfield's Television Programme*. The exhortation to another character, a Londoner, to 'Calm down!', a catchphrase from Enfield's *Scousers*, gets big applause. However, this is not just a take-off of Enfield, a repetition of the joke at Liverpool's expense, and the laughter is not merely born of recognition. There is a knowingness and a mockery that everyone on stage and in the audience is part of, and this becomes clearer in the lines that follow:

Londoner: Are you aware you're perpetuating a negative stereotype?

Scouser: Actually we only converse in that particular vernacular when we're visiting That London.

This gets a big laugh, partly of getting one over on the Londoner, and partly a joy in the overturning and undercutting of the stereotype.

*Excerpt from thick description, YNWA, 2014.*

The joke is based on a collusion between actors and audience; it's a stereotype, we laughed at it and with it, but we all knew it. This again recalls Bailey's concept of 'knowingness', a 'common inside knowledge of what [is] really going on' (1994, p.146). Bailey discusses the use of 'knowingness' in music hall acts in the late nineteenth century, that appealed to working class audience members because of this collusion between performers and spectators; as here, it gave 'a collective ownership/authority in the performance'. It is also a rare example of what Skeggs calls 'talking back' (2005, p.975), with Scousers speaking back to power and resisting their stereotype, albeit briefly before returning to it.

As seen earlier in this chapter, the Royal Court's range of strong women characters (and indeed its casting of strong female performers such as Eithne Brown, Pauline Daniels and Linzi Germaine) is also disruptive, disrupting the Scouser as male, and indeed the joke-teller as male. Women represented in Royal Court shows can not only be funny, but can be strong, aggressive, intelligent, knowledgeable, opinionated and self-determining, and moreover can drive the narrative. While women are sometimes portrayed as sexy and can fulfil the function of love interest, they are rarely just sexual objects or partners of more important characters

There is also a profound moment of gender disruption in *Sex and the Suburbs*, in which a character tells the story of returning home to find, to her surprise, her husband Mike vacuuming the kitchen wearing a dress:

'Mikes a man's man. He hasn't stepped in the kitchen for 20 years. I think that was more of a shock than the frock', she says. The message is a relatively challenging one,

that cross-dressing provides a liberation from both his maleness and her subjugation. 'It saved our marriage', she says. The audience accept the challenge, and there is applause for 'Audrey', Mike's new nom-de-ménage. 'Oh you should see her dance. Really lyrical. She's like the sister I never had,' says the wife of 'Audrey'. The audience are surprisingly supportive. 'We've got a great relationship now. Purely platonic...Until last week.' I groan inwardly, fearing the – very straight – audience reaction. In fact, there are big cheers, and more cheers when Audrey and her wife take each other in their arms and dance together. I feel quite proud, and a bit ashamed of my assumption. As they dance to Abba's *Fernando*, the audience claps along. At the end, there is a huge cheer. Audrey and her wife look into each other's eyes, and snog. A small murmur of disquiet has to be acknowledged, but overwhelmingly there's applause and laughter and actually happiness. The wife's line: 'Does this make me a lesbian?' is the comedy payoff. There are huge cheers and whistles. 'Sod what people think. Be what you want to be. And most of all, be happy', is the advice delivered by host Willow Wallace. There is big applause. It is a big moment. I have tears in my eyes and post my pride to Facebook.

*Excerpt from thick description, Sex and the Suburbs, 2014.*

In its main repertoire then, the Royal Court does on occasion broaden what it means to be a Scouser, both on stage and as the Scouse subject in the audience; moreover when it challenges the audience, audience members seem ready to embrace the challenge. The comedy of exclusion is visible even in the main repertoire however; in the parsimonious Lancashire characters who don't want to pay the price of 'Per tuppence per person per trip' for the ferry ('In the spirit that's made Lancashire what it is/They'd sooner be drowned than done'); in the

Mancunian spiv in *Ladies Day*; and of course in the snobbish Wirral characters of *Brick Up the Mersey Tunnels*.

### **Knowingness**

The importance of this reflection of Scouseness and locality to audience members is perhaps in part due to the wish to identify with what is on stage that Bourdieu suggests is the preference of the working class audience (2010, p.26). Taken together with the use of humour and audience participation, it may run deeper than that. There is a sense that it may be about capitalising on what Bailey (1994) calls an audience's 'knowingness' in order to create a sense of 'collective ownership/authority in the performance' (p.146). Writing about class and music hall in the late nineteenth century, Bailey contends that this 'knowingness', 'a common inside knowledge of what [is] really going on', is mobilised by the skilled performer to create a collective identity with the audience. Further, he suggests this recalls Althusser's concept of 'interpellation', where the performer hails the subject/audience member 'into a particular subject-role or identity'. In the case of the Royal Court, Liverpool, this identity is of the 'Scouse' subject with all of its connotations of class, myth and nostalgia, of an 'us' versus the 'Other' (a 'knowingness' of the Other's foibles, failings and idiosyncrasies) that is clear not only from much show content but from hits such as *Brick Up the Mersey Tunnel* which casts even those from nearby Wirral in the role of outsiders. This is cemented by specific knowledge, such as the topography and landmarks of the city, and intertextual references which are used throughout.

Works at the Royal Court are deliberately intertextual, with allusion drawn from local references, local history, local geography, and popular culture, particularly popular music and television. Much of the intertextuality is obligatory in the sense that audience members need to know the prior hypotext in order to get the joke or to be able to join in. In that sense the work is very much about inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Intertextuality gives a sense of belonging

through shared reference. Tretchikov's *Green Lady* painting gets its own laugh in *Once a Catholic*, as symbolic of poor taste as Blue Nun was in Leigh's *Abigail's Party*. These references to the local and to popular culture exploit the specific forms of cultural capital that are congruent with a working class, Scouse *habitus*.

In Godber's *Bouncers*, the audience laugh with recognition at the localised references:

[...] to shops (C&A, Chelsea Girl), to local celebrities (BBC Radio Merseyside's Billy and Wally, and one time Liverpool footballer Sammy Lee), to notorious Liverpool housing estate 'The Piggeries', and of course to clubs and pubs (The Continental, and 'the Big House', the local name for The Vines on Lime Street).

*Excerpt from thick description, Bouncers, 2013.*

The names referred to here and elsewhere in the Royal Court's repertoire are not just recognisable local names. They are located in certain parts of the city, often, like the audience, the north end. They are certain sorts of pubs and clubs, ones frequented by working class people. They are evocative; they have connotations that those from outside (outside the city, but also outside the social class) would not get. They are often old and nostalgic, and represent a time as well as a place, a particular way of life. They represent an exclusive inclusiveness. While such nostalgia can be regressive, it 'also provide[s] the route to valuable resources of social solidarity and meaning, as well as a sense of belonging and place', as Reid (2011, p.101) put it about *Luke the Labourer*, nearly two hundred years ago.

### **Participation: Every night's a pantomime**

When the Royal Court, Liverpool was mentioned as a subject of study to a friend, a director working in television, his response was telling: 'Ah, the Royal Court. Every night's a pantomime'.

Speaking to others in Liverpool about the theatre elicits a similar response, with those working in the field of cultural production or in contingent fields such as performing arts education often showing a measure of disdain for the repertoire, as with this performing arts lecturer:

One of the lecturers from a local university says hello to me [outside the theatre]:

‘We’re on a trip to see “Popular Theatre”’, he explains, raising his eyebrows into air quotes that enclose the last two words, demonstrating if anyone is in any doubt that the Royal Court is really not his thing. He goes on to deconstruct the play, explaining why it’s not good, and frightening off the woman next to me who had been saying how she was enjoying it.

*Excerpt from thick description, Ladies Day, 2013.*

There is a real sense of people who think of themselves as a cognoscenti, authorities who are distancing themselves from this sort of theatre, whether they’ve seen it or not. The theatre lecturer above explains his attendance almost guiltily, presenting the alibi of a sort of field trip to see an exotic form of theatre; ‘Popular Theatre’, as opposed, one presumes, to unpopular theatre, or perhaps antithetical to legitimate theatre. He cannot be on a regular trip to the theatre for enjoyment, as he clearly would not enjoy such a thing. He is not guilty about his conscious snobbery, which is entirely acceptable. The fact the he feels the need to explain at all is of course the issue; it is not so much an explanation as a demonstration of his detachment and his distinction; he is demonstrating his ‘cultural superiority to the bad object’ (Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood, 2008, p.11). And he is not just commenting on the theatre but its audience, making a purposeful distinction between the people who might go and enjoy such theatre, who, it can be assumed, know no better, and himself, the aesthete with sound and informed judgment: ‘Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (Bourdieu, 2010, p.xxix). Audience members are sometimes conscious of this distancing. In her interview, Education Officer Joyce talks about

actors she knows being dismissive of the Royal Court. She separates herself from them, calling them 'the creative Nazi party'.

This purposeful distinction suggests not only detachment and a different 'taste', but also a sense of superiority. However, the metaphor of pantomime given by the television director is nonetheless a good one, and has been made by others. Hickling, arts critic at *The Guardian*, used the phrase 'adult pantomime' to describe Lawless's Christmas show *Scouse Pacific* (2010b).

Individual theatre shows produced by the Royal Court are, like pantomime, a bricolage of pastiche and parody, with intertextual reference, comedy routines, and set pieces. Like pantomime, the story tends to provide an opportunity for music and comedy routine, which often appear more important than the stories themselves. For instance, *Sex and the Suburbs* is a series of comedy sketches exploring the sex-related problems of fictional radio listeners interspersed with more than 30 songs; *YNWA* is similarly a series of sketches about the history of Liverpool Football Club shown in chronological order, interspersed with popular song and football chant, and an opportunity for communal singing. Scenes then are not always about moving the story forward, but provide what Taylor (2007, p.14) calls 'the excuse for entertainment'.

As discussed above, there is the 'saucy innuendo and double entendre', topical or local gags and wordplay that are the fundamentals of pantomime according to Taylor (2007, p.14). Further, performers routinely 'break out' of character to cross the wall and discuss the show or the theatre itself, and 'real celebrities' (such as *Emmerdale*'s Roxanne Pallet) – or local ones (such as Mickey Starke) – are cast, so the veneer of character is paper thin. Characters themselves are the 'easily recognisable types' that Coupland discusses in his paper about pantomime in the Welsh Valleys (2009, p.8). The metaphor of pantomime is of course not complete – unlike pantomime, these are not family-oriented shows; even the Christmas show is not really suitable



for children. There is no magic, and the shows are not driven by a 'dame' (although the combination of strength, aggression and campness of some of the women's roles are reminiscent of the dame). There is little spectacle, and, presumably due to budget constraints, design is low key and even in the Christmas show sets are cheap in contrast to the glitzy spectacle of a real pantomime. However there is a similar complicity with the audience, with the audience being drawn into the frame, and a reflexivity, a knowing artificiality that is often present.

### **Audience Participation**

This pantomime style of presentation contributes to one of the most important and distinctive elements of theatre at the Royal Court, which is the festive and communal atmosphere, which is both generated by and allows for audience participation. This is signalled in shows, as seen here, at the end of the opening scene of *Ladies Day*:

There is a big whoop and applause though at the end of the scene when the reveal comes: the four female actors whip off their white factory coats *Full Monty*-style to reveal glam frocks, shoes and fascinators, ready for Ladies' Day. The audience stay with it and clap along to a rendition of *Amarillo*, as the performers march along, Peter Kay style; and the set piece brings much energy and participation, leading to a big round of very appreciative applause at end of the scene. The audience seem to be applauding their own opportunity to participate as much as the performance.

*Excerpt from thick description, Ladies Day, 2013.*

Participation, in the form of call and response, singing along, or even dancing, is often directly sought and nearly always encouraged. The 'Fourth Wall' is often breeched, and 'banter' takes place, creating a relationship with the actors and adding to the show. Audiences are given

permission to perform and participate, quite explicitly in some cases, as here in *Sex and the Suburbs*:

‘Welcome Liverpool!’ is the opening line, and it is greeted by whoops from the audience. ‘We’ve been to some rough places’, says the actor who plays radio producer Rory Reynolds. ‘You know the score, shell suits as evening wear’. Everybody loves this, despite (or because of) Liverpool being seen as the shell-suit-wearing capital of the country. ‘Is everyone ready for a bit of a rehearsal?’ asks producer Rory, who is acting as a warm-up man. There is a big shout; people really are ready to join in. ‘That won’t do!’ he says. ‘Is everyone ready?’ This time there is a huge shout. Next, he produces instruction cards. The first says ‘Cheer’, and everybody cheers. ‘Fabulous, you’re brilliant’, says Rory. The next card says ‘Stamp your feet’, and of course everybody does. The third says, ‘Orgasm’. There are some great screams, followed by huge laughter. A man in the audience says ‘sorry love’, and people laugh more.

*Excerpt from thick description, Sex and the Suburbs, 2014.*

Jokes also give the audience a chance to participate, not just providing a moment in which to share a laugh (‘some of them repeating the punchline in admiration or as if to say ‘d’ye get it?’ - Thick Description, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Fazakerley*, 2014), but as shared references, often intertextual ones drawing on popular culture. For instance, in *Ladies Day*:

Audience members are keen to laugh, and they are at least in part laughs of recognition, from references to television adverts (‘Aah, Bisto’) to local haunts like the News Bar and the Zanzibar, and local mythology such as ‘Grab a Granny Night at the Grafton’ which all form part of the factory ‘banter’.

*Excerpt from thick description, Ladies Day, 2013.*

Endings to shows are not moral or constructive, and neither are there twists or tricks. While there is resolution to narratives, these are often weak. The real resolution is for the audience; invariably there is an opportunity to get out of your seat at the end and dance, sing along, or, in the case of *YNWA*, a history of Liverpool Football Club, wave your scarf. At the end of *Lennon*, there is a standing ovation, after which everyone stays standing for the encore. This is *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and everyone sings and dances along. The last spoken line of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Fazakerley* is 'Let's boogie!', and like the end of *Dirty Dusting* there is a sort of official stage dance with audience members dancing in their seats, some waving hands above heads, some stood up. There are big claps, cheers and waves. The relationship is more like friends at a wedding than audience and performers. There is an almost cathartic sense; audience members can finally own the performance; in the finale, the show is handed over to them to create truly 'collective gatherings' (Bourdieu, 1980, 239) that are celebratory and participative: 'popular entertainment secures the spectator's participation in the show and collective participation in a festivity' (Bourdieu, 1980, p.239).

However, this is more than audience participation, it is in a sense more like audience collaboration in that audience members are contributing to what makes the show enjoyable. Even when audience members are not specifically invited to take part in this direct way, they are voluble in their responses, fully involved and expressing their sympathy (or otherwise) with the characters. This goes back to the producers' very first show at the Royal Court, *Brick Up the Mersey Tunnels*, as performer Davy Edge describes, talking about the reaction as he performs: 'I get 'ahs' [of sympathy] every night from the women in the audience' (Hall, 2011). Edge compares being an audience member at *Brick Up the Mersey Tunnels* to watching football: 'having them shout out, it's like watching a match – 'oh, come on!' I got a shout one night when I got rejected [by another character], 'I'll take you home love!' Comments like that are commonplace'.

In shows where participation and banter are not specifically sought, such as at the more traditionally played *Lennon*, a potted life story of Beatle John Lennon, audience members still find a way to take part. As the action proceeds, there is a distinct 'Ooh' when Lennon's girlfriend Cynthia announces she's pregnant, despite this really being fifty-year-old news and frankly no longer shocking, not least because many attenders have clearly seen the play before and know what is coming. Later, people tut in sympathy when it's reported that Lennon's mother Julia, just as Lennon gets to know her again, gets hit by a car and dies. There are visceral and performative reactions, even when everyone knows the story.

Similarly, in the extant *Once a Catholic* which is constrained by O'Malley's script, the audience provide a sort of audio meta-commentary:

They love the over-acting from Mother Peter. 'Whoa' when a girl is called back to see Mother Peter. They love 'the Lady of Fatima knicker'. Shocked sound at 'all those poor black fellas' who would eat all their lunch. Groan when she's sick. Express their shock at some of the abuse the girls receive at the hands of the teachers. Love Mother Basil's reaction to the naive question of how sperms were introduced into the uterus. Spontaneous applause at the end of the scene. Bit of a murmur of agreement on the line about Britain having a lot more coming to her after what she'd done to Ireland. Great laughter at the assertion that murdering your wife was less of a sin than missing mass. Hoots of opprobrium at understanding a man may lose control and murder his wife. Huge laughs at Irish dancing and everyone claps along. Shock when nun calls Mary Mooney a bitch. 'Aaaw' when Mooney is unsympathetically dealt with because she can't afford the pilgrimage to Fatima. 'Oh my God' when the nun finds the diary [...] Someone even joins in with the Catholic confessional prayer, 'Bless me father for I have sinned'.

The enjoyment is visceral, there is a real, lived relationship with what's on stage, it really is happening as if for the first time, despite the familiarity of these stories (and sometimes the play itself) to the audiences. It is also emotional, and is the antithesis of 'aesthetic distancing', the 'detachment' that Bourdieu says is the preserve of the aesthete (2010, p.26; 1980 p.239). However, these responses that suggest total immersion, and reactions as if to real life, should not be mistaken for representing a passive and gullible audience who have confused theatre with reality. This is a consciousness of the artificiality of performance, a willing suspension of disbelief. The audience know well that this is a show, a story playing in front of their eyes that they can be deeply involved with, but a story all the same. They are not confusing it with the real, but giving the story the full investment – in the forms of attention and reaction – it deserves, and responding theatrically in kind. It is a kind of dialogue, a mannered one on both sides. Listening to the audience side of the conversation alone would not be listening just to reaction, but to encouragement and contribution, as if to one side of a telephone conversation, rather than to a passive receiver; it is an audience encouraging a storyteller to tell their story, warts and all. This live audio narrative represents a partnership; it is part of the audience's contribution to an event they are helping to create. By audibly 'identify[ing] with the characters' joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate, espousing their hopes and ideals, living their life' (2010, p.25), they are, as Bourdieu suggests, entering into the game.

Audience members are able just as quickly to leave the world of the show and acknowledge the artifice of theatre, and to take part in it on the meta-level, as seen earlier engaging with jokes about the nature of the show, the venue and the management, or, as in one performance of *Ladies Day* which will be discussed shortly, engage with an alternative. They also enjoy each other's banter and see it as part of the game. As seen from the comments of some of the

research participants, many audience members themselves see audience contributions such as banter and heckling as not only an enhancement of the show, but also as a distinctive part of their Royal Court experience that not only isn't present, but wouldn't actually work, elsewhere in the field of Liverpool theatregoing. This is demonstrated by focus members Sarah and Karen, when I ask them about some of the differences they identify between the theatres:

Sarah: Yeah. But I think it's different here [at the Royal Court] in terms of if you're heckling [agreement from the group] and the performers that you have here can deal with that, whereas it would be very unseemly in anything else [...]

Maria: So you like participation here but you don't [at the Everyman]? And it's partly because it's a sort of banter

Sarah: Yeah. I don't shout out, but I like to, I enjoy the banter, it doesn't spoil the performance

[....]

Susan: I think here the banter sort of makes the performance more; the shows are funny as is, but with the banter, I think it makes it more, it adds [yeah, it adds]

Karen: *Special Measures* was even better because everyone was shouting out weren't they

Susan: *Special Measures* was [...inaudible as people are agreeing]

Karen: You wouldn't get that in the Empire, you just wouldn't

- Maria: What did they do in *Special Measures* that you wouldn't do at the Empire?
- Karen: People were just shouting out weren't they you know and you were just having a laugh and stuff like that because it was when the [Tory] minister [character] and stuff like that, he arrived on the stage, he was booed
- Maria: Oh, was he booed?
- All: Yeah
- Maria: Because he was the Tory minister?
- Sarah: Yeah [others agree]. You see, it gets to be a bit of a panto here and there. (Focus Group 1).

For these participants, this participation is part of what makes the Royal Court – and themselves as audience members and collaborators – distinctive. However, the participation is not universally enjoyed. Joyce sometimes finds it intrusive and would prefer participation to be on an invitation-only basis, putting the performers back in charge. She comments:

- Joyce: I want to go, 'they're the actors, they're doing their job, we've paid, we're the audience'. If they invite us in or if there's the odd little clever, 'Blah, blah' from the audience, great. I have been to the odd performance where someone has, it's like they've wanted it to be the show, you know, a heckler who over-heckles, that does my head in.
- Maria: Yes.

Joyce: But when it's interaction that's invited, I mean, we're the first up to dance, if there's an opportunity to dance, we will dance, you know.

At one performance of *Ladies Day*, an extraordinary piece of impromptu business occurs due to the illness of one of the cast, which has delayed the start of the second half:

the houselights finally go out and the stage is lit. But the curtain doesn't go up.

Instead, actor Eithne Browne comes on to explain that another performer is not well, they have had no choice but to call an ambulance. The show can't go on. She explains the procedure for seeing the show in one of the remaining two performances, or exchanging tickets for a future show. Then, impromptu and quite extraordinarily, Eithne goes into song. She belts out the first couple of lines of Mrs Johnstone's song from the musical *Blood Brothers*: 'Tell me it's not true, Say it's just a story...'. She seems to want to entertain the audience, and prove that she and the cast are still troupers who want to go on, even though in truth they can't. 'Say I only dreamed it!' she sings. A man in the audience shouts: 'Want me to stand in?' 'Aw, you!' replies Eithne, quickly switching to a parody of down-your-way, over-the-garden-wall Scouse; and to the rest of the audience, in broad Scouse: 'We know 'im, 'e lives along the landin'. 'E's clean!' 'I'll be dirty if you want me to' he shouts back. 'Well, I'm still single. I'm not desperate. But I'm anxious!' Eithne responds, to a big laugh from the audience, who seem to be enjoying the knockabout banter more than the first half of the play. Her performance is presentational, projected at us like late music hall. Eithne sings another line from *Blood Brothers*. She's interrupted by a shout from the audience: 'Go and see yer mate', shouts a woman. 'Don't tell me to get off, it's my theatre!' Eithne shouts back. Nonetheless, having proved that it probably is her theatre, Eithne feels



able to leave the stage. The houselights come back up. People are not sure what to do.

Interestingly, hardly anyone leaves.

On this occasion, the impromptu seems to be enjoyed much more than the scripted, and nobody appears to feel short-changed at not seeing the second half of the show. This may in part be sympathy and understanding for the stricken actor. However it is perhaps also because the play, being more a vehicle for a series of sketches and situations than having a strong story, was easily replaced by the more dramatic real event, which after all also contained freeform knockabout humour, audience participation and a bit of a song, which is what everyone is here for. As in the case of *Mdlle Dejeek*, the celebrated pachyderm, it's not about the plots, it's about the elephant.

## Conclusion

Strategies of localisation, authenticity, comedy and participation are seen by research participants as making them feel 'at home', with focus group member Ursula describing the programming as 'local theatre for local people'. While strategies of localisation and comedy are not unique to the Royal Court, Liverpool, the saturation of the programme in this way perhaps is. Participation goes beyond what can be a sterile 'audience participation' experience to something closer to audience contribution, where what the audience provides is essential to their enjoyment of the show.

Working class lives are presented on stage. On the one hand, these are often presented uncritically and lack the ideological conviction of theatre that has taken place in the field in the past, for instance at the Everyman. It is sanitised and depoliticised and it is narrow in its representation, particularly in its adherence to a 'Scouse' mythology which is at best a partial picture of Liverpool. However, it is not 'middle-class voyeurism' or 'working class porn' (Harpin,

in Adiseshiah, 2015, p.12); it is working class lives for working class people, often created by working class people. It tries to escape a spectatorial position by breaking the fourth wall and encouraging participation.

There are issues for representation, of women, and most especially of black voices and lives. Of course, this issue is not limited to the Royal Court or indeed the field of (Liverpool) theatre. However, as a forum for working class expression and representation, the Royal Court's representation of a Scouse persona and sensibility is not only reflecting a stereotype, it is part of its construction and perpetuation; it is limiting what it means to be Scouse, indeed what it is to be working class.

For many white working class people, the Royal Court is successful at creating accessible theatre, and at making the theatre seem other than an elitist pastime. The congruent working class *habitus* is able to utilise and publicly display a variety of capitals that are socially valued in its own social world. These include specific forms of knowledge (knowledge of popular culture and specific genres, knowledge of a local topography and of an imagined or lived Liverpool), specific attributes (a quick wit, an adroitness with language, an ability to laugh at oneself and others), and dispositions (an openness to the 'real' of the natural and bodily, a sense of hedonism and of living for the moment). This contrasts with the forms of cultural capital which would be valorised at many theatres (including others in this field), such as a knowledge of a theatrical or literary canon, or an aesthetic distancing or disinterestedness.

Except for the case of *Special Measures*, there is little evidence on stage that comedy is seen either as a vehicle for getting a point across or to deliver a message in a more palatable form. Instead, it appears to be enjoyed as an end in itself, 'having a laugh' being the aim of the event. While both Bourdieu and McGrath suggest this enjoyment of comedy is part of an enculturated working class aesthetic, the central importance of humour perhaps also reflects the social aspect

of the event as much as this enculturated 'taste'. 'Having a laugh' may be integral to 'a good night out' with friends or family; and, for many, it appears attending the Royal Court is about 'a good night out' as much as (or perhaps more than) 'going to the theatre'. Together with the enjoyment of participation and music, this gives the 'collective festivity' that Bourdieu (2010, p.26) suggests that working class audiences prefer. Ultimately, for audience members, going to the Royal Court is about having a good time:

[...] the being-in-the-present which is affirmed in the readiness to take advantage of the good times and take time as it comes, in itself, an affirmation of solidarity with others (who are often the only guarantee against the threats of the future), inasmuch as this temporal immanentism is a recognition of the limits which define the condition. (Bourdieu 2010, p.176)

It's a good night out: 'At the end of the show I asked my neighbour what she thought. She replied: 'It must've been good mustn't it. Because if you've enjoyed it, it is good'' (Thick Description, *Lennon*, 2014).

## Chapter 7. Conclusions

This thesis has examined theatregoing at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, a theatre that is peculiarly successful in attracting and retaining working class people to its audiences. The aim of the thesis was to address the following research questions about the Royal Court and its audiences:

- how theatre is experienced at Liverpool's Royal Court
- what it is about the Theatre that makes working class people feel at home
- how the history of the Theatre has shaped its place in the imaginary of class in Liverpool
- what the implications of the Royal Court's success are for current cultural policy debates over access and participation, and for theatres.

In addition, it aimed to understand what this tells us about Bourdieu's conceptual triad. This conclusion takes each of these issues in turn before making recommendations for future study.

### **How are working class people experiencing theatre at Liverpool's Royal Court?**

The quantitative evidence of attendance by people in some of the poorest wards in the country as well as their repeat visits (Royal Court, 2009) attests to the Royal Court Liverpool's success in

not only attracting working class audience members but also in encouraging them to return. This suggests the Royal Court is successful in creating an environment in which working class people feel at home. The observation of a season of theatre events for this thesis revealed audience members who were comfortable in their surroundings, socialising with friends and strangers, and making the auditorium their home for the duration of their visit. This was evidenced by their relaxed attitude, their freedom of movement in the auditorium, their convivial sociability with friends and strangers, and their inclination and ability to participate. The theatregoers who took part in the ethnographic research for this study, in both focus groups and interviews, as well as contributors to TripAdvisor, often used the vocabulary of home to describe their experience. Moreover, audience members are often proprietorial about the theatre, calling the theatre 'our place' and expressing a sense of ownership, for instance having a proprietorial relationship with the actors and with the staff, a sense that they know them and they are 'just like us'.

Some audience members in this study contrast the Royal Court with other theatres in the field of Liverpool theatregoing; other theatres are sometimes characterised as 'snooty' or 'posh' (where a more polite theatregoing behaviour is encountered or expected), or as 'thespian' (an ironic epithet that nonetheless connotes a more legitimate aesthetic). Audience members perceive that modes of behaviour which are tolerated or even encouraged at the Royal Court (such as 'banter', participation, and the close relationship with performers) would not be acceptable or encouraged at venues such as the Empire or the Everyman.

### **What is it about the Theatre that makes working class people feel at home?**

As seen in Chapter 5, the *doxa* and conventions of the Royal Court are congruent to the *habitus* of working class audience members. The Royal Court's building is key to creating a congenial environment. This is in part an accident of history that has been inherited and exploited by the Theatre. Chapter 3 explored the venue's history, showing it as a once grand but faded theatre

that became a pop music venue 'owned' and loved by its various subcultures and then returned to the people through the medium of Scouse theatre. These pasts are imprinted in the building, contributing to a sense of memory and nostalgia. The Royal Court's placement in the topography of the city, half a mile away from the *avant-garde*, and in sight of – but just beyond – the valorised neo-classical quarter, means it is instead associated with the everydayness of bus stops and cheap retail. This lends it an unassuming and unpretentious credibility, as represented by its neighbours, the down to earth shopping centre and the down at heel pub. The serving of food and drink in the auditorium, and the low key, local staff, encourage a relaxed ambience in which social groups make the space their own, and which signal a change of conventions from more valorised, legitimate theatre. This is reflected in its current position in the field, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 shows that audience members are aware of the Royal Court's position in the field. It also shows that The Royal Court, Liverpool, is itself aware of the classed dimensions of theatrical forms and deliberately constructs itself against them, creating work that appeals to a working class aesthetic. Meaning at the Royal Court is generated by cultural producers who are largely of the same class origin as its audiences. The repertoire constantly reflects aspects of working class people's lives back to them, in subject matter and settings that are often about the world of manual or unskilled work (call centres, clubs, taxi driving and hairdressing), or working class recreation (popular music, football, racecourses and the holiday camp disco). Characters are easy to identify with, not just because they may do similar jobs or have similar interests to audience members, but because they have similar challenges and face similar dilemmas, often domestic or centred around money. Form is equally important in reflecting a working class aesthetic. Plots are straightforward and proceed logically, as Bourdieu and McGrath both suggested. Moreover, plots are vehicles for the tropes that are of central importance; those of comedy and participation, which allow for 'a good night out'. These tropes are bound up with a

Scouse persona, one that is based in class as much as place. Ultimately, what the Royal Court has done is to create in a theatre a social space which is analogous to the field of Scouseness, to the field of a white working class Liverpool. The congruent cultural capital brought to this aesthetic by a working class, Liverpool *habitus* means working class people can feel 'like fish in water' at the Royal Court.

### **How has the history of the Royal Court shaped its place in the imaginary of class in Liverpool?**

The current Royal Court is very much bound up in its history, through its building, and the changing importance of both building and theatre institution in the topography of the evolving city. The Royal Court, as the Amphitheatre, originally occupied a topographical space associated with street entertainment and cheap spectacle. Through the evolution of the Amphitheatre and then the Royal Court, the same physical site became an important and impressive node in the topography of a commercial Liverpool that was growing in civic pride and cultural importance. Most recently that part of the city centre has been side-lined, its layout becoming incoherent and difficult to traverse. At the time of the research for this study, the Royal Court occupied an urban space known for buses, a notorious pub, and cut price retail. The building itself, under a series of managements, had been allowed to become shabby and had lost its landmark corner position as the streetscape has changed. All of this, alongside the human scale of the deco building and its contrast with the grand yet forbidding neoclassical bordering it, actually made it more approachable.

As Marvin Carlson says, 'the ghosts of a public's previous experience at a specific location...are not completely exorcised' (2003, p.140) when a new or permanent building is erected, and the Royal Court's history is imprinted on the city, the building and the social imaginations of Liverpool people, and forms part of the current audience experience. The retention and

restoration of some of the iconography of the original auditorium, such as the gilding and the boxes, allows audience members to appreciate the comfort of 'the traditional theatre thing', some enjoying the Royal Court as a simulacrum, a representation of old time theatre and music hall, as seen in Chapter 5. Purposely or otherwise, the present day Royal Court trades on this history and class relationship with place and culture. The food in the auditorium and the bar at the back, and the form of the shows (trading on 'knowingness', the presentational performance styles, the breaking of the fourth wall, and the level of participation), all allow audience members to behave, and enjoy the show, very much as they would have done in the early days of music hall. The later history of the theatre is also present in the way the theatre presents itself and is understood; the many years of the theatre struggling to stay open through variety and the Ken Dodd shows gave the theatre back to the people; and the rock and roll period which allowed them to own it, or at least lease it for a night.

### **What are the implications for cultural policy, and for theatres?**

It was noted in the opening chapter that the most enduring policy mechanism used for encouraging theatre attendance has been intervention in pricing, most significantly through ongoing ticket subsidy (Austen-Smith, 1980; Peacock 1994), but also through one-off initiatives such as *A Night Less Ordinary*. Drawing on Bourdieu, Ahearne (2000, p.19) suggests that mechanisms such as price intervention are merely 'ritually evoked "direct" modes of cultural action' that in fact create an 'alibi' of democratisation to stand for what is in fact state funding of middle class, legitimate culture. Indeed, we know that pricing is only one very small part of what are sometimes called 'barriers' to attendance (Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre, 1999; Chan et al., 2008). This is substantiated by the empirical results of such modes of action; despite these interventions having taken place since the inception of the Arts Council of Great Britain, those who are 'socially disadvantaged' remain less likely to attend theatre (McDonnell and Shellard



2006; Chan et al., 2008; Bunting et al., 2008), and attendance at cultural events is still largely dominated by the middle classes (Neelands et al., 2015). This thesis posits that the issues around theatregoing for working class people are much more complex than pricing alone, and therefore will not be solved by price intervention.

Before coming to possible solutions, it is worth a side note on the *a priori* assumptions about the nature of culture and the necessity of cultural democratisation. Firstly, as mentioned in the opening chapter, Miles and Sullivan describe low engagement with cultural events such as theatre having been seen in policy terms as a 'lack' in what they call the deficit model (2012, p.319); working class people (and others who do not attend legitimate cultural institutions) may not themselves perceive this as a 'lack'. This may be at least in part due to the second point; in their study of cultural participation in Scotland and Denmark, Stephenson et al. (2015) maintain that participation itself is not so much the problem as the counting of it. They suggest that what counts as culture when participation is measured by state agents of cultural policy tends to be legitimate arts-based activities that most often take place in state-subsidised venues, to the exclusion of preferred cultural forms, meaning that 'cultural policy in Scotland and Denmark continues to overlook the cultural values of the heterogeneous communities that make up their citizenry' (Stephenson et al., 2015, p.15). In other words, those characterised as non-participants are not necessarily not participating in culture at all, merely not participating in state-sanctioned culture. This problematising of non-attendance then may be more in the minds of, and a problem for, agents of policy and arts institutions, than it is for those who don't attend legitimate, state-funded culture.

However, given the policy preoccupation with democratisation of arts and culture, yet its failure to actually widen participation, it is clear that a fresh approach is necessary. Rather than focusing on subsidy to suppress ticket price, cultural policy (and indeed theatre marketing)

needs to appeal to what Stephenson et al. call the 'cultural values' (2015, p.15) of heterogeneous working class people. The sociological approach to the understanding of working class theatregoing as presented in this thesis, and particularly Bourdieu's concepts of capital, *habitus*, and field, allows us to examine in much more detail not only what the issues are for working class people, but what their values are. Examining the issues and values suggests the solution lies not in a price reduction, but in a new model of theatre. How the Royal Court, Liverpool, has responded to the issues and values of their working class audiences is instructive. The potential issues for working class people are various, and some are shared with other people who do not attend theatre. As Bourdieu suggests, as well as perhaps being economically poor, working class people can be time poor. This means it is important to reassure prospective theatregoers that time and money invested in a theatre visit will not squandered. In addition, as seen in the last section, working class people and others who have not attended a particular theatre are vulnerable, in that they have preconceptions about whether they will fit in, and fear about how to behave, and these things precede (and in some cases perhaps preclude) attendance. Working class people have legitimate concerns about the potential for being exposed to the symbolic violence inherent in the separating mechanism represented of a theatre environment, and need to be given a safe space.

Theatre is by its nature a risky business for audiences; like other cultural artefacts, a show is always an unknown until it is experienced. Some audience members, like the 'highly theatre-literate' in Walmsley's research (2011, p.9), will relish the challenge this presents. For others, for instance those who already feel out of their depth and wonder whether they will understand what's happening, or feel worried they will be unable to demonstrate the correct sorts of understanding in the right sort of way, theatre may be a risk too far. After all, not understanding a theatre show or not enjoying it in the valorised way is much more public and potentially

exposing than not 'getting' a novel. This is perhaps even more true of those who have never attended theatre at all. For working class people with their particular relationships with theatre and legitimate culture, pre-information about the whole theatre event (as opposed to just the show) is particularly critical. Potential audience members need to be reassured that they will be welcome at what they may perceive as an elitist pastime, and that they will fit in.

The Royal Court Theatre is very good at employing strategies that minimise these anxieties. The Royal Court's offer of food, drink and a good night out alongside the show presents a low-cost risk in social and cultural terms as well as in time and money. The Royal Court's promotional videos not only speak directly to working class people and demonstrate the relaxed and fun environment, they feature working class audience members themselves. This allows potential theatregoers to see and hear other audience members in the auditorium so they can judge whether or not they can fit in without putting themselves in an exposing and vulnerable position; they can also pick up the subtle signs about dress code, behaviour, and appropriate or accepted response (like 'having a laugh'). This minimises both risk and anxiety.

Offering food alongside the entertainment is also reassuring. It spreads the risk, providing the opportunity for a night out whose success is not wholly dependent on an uncertain event like a show, but also on a more stable (and for repeat visitors predictable) element such as a meal. In addition, the serving of food and drink in the auditorium before the show helps to create a convivial and sociable atmosphere in which the audience can become comfortable in, and start to take ownership of, the venue before the show begins. This of course allows for greater sociability, further facilitated at the Royal Court by its innovative seating. However it is also significant in allowing for the creation of a liminal space.

Liminality, as touched upon in Chapter 5, is where social order is temporarily overturned. At the Royal Court, there is a large proportion of social time before the show where the auditorium

belongs to the audience and not the players or the staff, in that staff are almost invisible and audience members treat the space as their own, and in which different conventions have evolved that are distinctive to activity in other theatres in the field. This liminal pre-show time is complemented by liminal physical space – the spaces in between the tables and around seating areas, the walkways people use to access facilities such as the bar and the toilets – which allow for and indeed encourage social interaction between as well as within social groups. This overturning of conventions before a Royal Court show extends into the show itself, which allows for play and playfulness, not only by the actors but by the audience, who can play with the players. This is positive for working class audience members who want to take part, to enter the game.

The form of theatre that allows this is complemented by the content. Like all theatregoers, working class people will be attracted in part by the repertoire; as seen in Chapter 6, the Royal Court's repertoire speaks directly to working class people, not only in its use of recognisable characters and workplaces, but in its reflection of a mythical, local, and heroic self-referential working class culture. The combination of the social space the Royal Court creates, and its repertoire, doesn't just assuage the fears of potential working class audience members; it speaks to their values, which are about sociality and a good night out. Even so, working class people are not a homogenous group. While some will enjoy comedy and participation, others will prefer more valorised, 'legitimate' theatre. Nonetheless, the Royal Court is appealing to large numbers of working class people, some as part of wider cultural participation that includes legitimate theatre, and some as their only, and indeed first, experience of live theatre.

In summary, the implications of these findings for cultural policy and its reliance on subsidy as a mechanism to widen participation in the arts are significant, and suggest a new theatre model. Such a model would include repertoire that, in both form and content, spoke to working class

people but also allowed them a voice. It would be situated in a venue that was homologous with other spaces in which working class people find themselves 'at home', such as the bingo hall and the cinema. It would be a social space that encouraged interaction between audience members, as well as between audiences and performers. It would not only show potential audience members how the rules work, but would allow audiences to develop their own rules and rituals. It would allow for the creation of social spaces which speak to working class values around spending valuable leisure time in convivial sociability. In other words, a new theatre model would enable working class people to attend theatre as they would know they are welcome; it would let them know they can join in the game; it would be their place.

### **What this thesis tells us about Bourdieu's conceptual triad**

Bourdieu's conceptual triad has been a useful lens through which to examine and understand the power relations in the field of Liverpool theatre both past and present. Applying it in this way has also demonstrated how relevant Bourdieu's work on class and taste is. Specifically, it has shown how the conceptual triad can be applied to theatregoing in order to understand contemporary culture's relationship with class. As seen in Chapters 3 and 4, 'field' is not just useful as a concept, but is useful as a method by which to map the positions and trajectories of agents in a field, to identify their strategies for preservation and distinction, and to understand the forces being exerted both within and upon the field. In particular, Chapter 3 demonstrated how a field is affected by homologous fields and the wider social field in which all fields are situated. It showed the dynamism of agents in a field, and how different agents vie for position, and change their trajectories in response to the changes, entrances and exits of other agents within the field. And it showed how the field is related to 'taste', a cultural construct which adapts to maintain class distinctions as other distinctions (such as that between legitimate and illegitimate theatre) are broken down.

Chapter 4 identified the boundaries of the field of contemporary Liverpool theatre and its indicators of specific capital, demonstrating that a field can be mapped synchronically and relationally in the way that Bourdieu suggests, to show the power structures and distributions of capitals within the field. Tracing the 'banking' of capital by the field's more valorised agents confirmed the importance of agents' trajectories in the field, that is, it emphasised that the field is not only synchronic but diachronic.

In addition, it was interesting to note that the concept of field and its function appears to be discernible to people within that field. The empirical research suggests that participants were often conscious of the distinctions and boundaries within the field of Liverpool theatregoing, using these differences to categorise and position them. Participants contrasted the Royal Court with other agents in the field, from the 'snooty' to the 'thespian'. Audience members perceive that audience behaviour and conventions (such as 'banter', participation, and the specific relationship with the performers) that is tolerated or even encouraged at the Royal Court would not be acceptable at other poles of the field. This suggests audience members have an awareness of the arbitrary nature of the values placed on forms of cultural capital within different fields. This was true (and sometimes especially so) even where participants had not visited a particular venue; their preconceptions of a particular theatre already informed their ideas of behaviour, codes, and other audience members they might encounter there. This made some theatres in the field a threat to some participants' sense of self; they were conscious that their potentially incongruent *habitus* and lack of the social and cultural capital appropriate to the *doxa* of the field would be betrayed by them being unable to 'play the game'.

Moreover, in the case of some audience members at the Royal Court, Liverpool, there was a consciousness of theatre as a site for struggle, a tacit understanding that the conventions of theatre were part of its separating mechanism, weapons used in the struggle to gain capital in

the field. Some research participants said they intentionally used strategies of subversion such as casual dressing to undermine others' capital in the field and to signal to those who may otherwise feel excluded that the field was open to all. In this study, those using subversion seemed particularly conscious of (or perhaps articulate about) field as a site for struggle. Others were less conscious of this but nonetheless struggled to conserve their place in the field, employing their own strategies for distinction such as a particular taste for 'difficult' comedy or a claim for a lifelong and heritable sensitivity to particular art forms related to their familial intelligence. That is to say, some agents in the field appear aware of the subtle signs and manifestations (tangible and non-tangible) telling them and others that theatre is or is not their field; they are aware of others with what they perceive to be the correct modes of behaviour, dress, and aesthetic appreciation and who are like or not like them; some try to conserve their own position; some even have a concern that their own modes of behaviour may unconsciously exclude others, and take steps to subvert this.

Interestingly though, those in the research sample who were most likely to use strategies of subversion were those with the most capital. This is counter to Bourdieu's expectation, according to Wacquant (2007), where those with most capital are more likely to use strategies of conservation. In this thesis, it was apparent that those in the sample with the most capital had the most ability to subvert the field, their cultural capital giving them the power to challenge the dominant message. Paradoxically, it is possible they also gained cultural capital through such a stance. Those in the sample with the least capital seemed more keen to conserve their capital and to uphold the status of the field. It is worth acknowledging though that this may be in large part due to the sample and the sampling frame for this thesis. Those in Liverpool's theatregoing field with the most capital were probably not represented in this research and may not form part of the audiences at the Royal Court or its Choir; those with the least may not get involved in research for the reasons discussed in Chapter 1.

The thesis illustrates the importance of cultural capital. The capitals at play at the Royal Court can be identified. Chapter 6 has shown that the tropes used by the Royal Court in its repertoire are congruent to the cultural capital that makes up the class *habitus* of audience members, and indeed valorises this capital. The first trope examined in the chapter was comedy. Both Bourdieu (2010) and McGrath (1989) emphasise that comedy is particularly important for working class audience members. Comedy is always foregrounded at the Royal Court, and is used in many ways: to disrupt dominant discourses, to puncture pomposity, but most of all as a way to join audience members together with the performers, who are often all on the same 'side'. Comedy is bound up with the Scouse persona. The Scouse trope in the repertoire at the Royal Court goes beyond local references in shows, to include local writers and local casting of well-known actors with authentic accents and experiences or personas. 'Scouse' here is not a simple stand in for a sense of place, but rather a complex construction which marries place to class and reflects and contributes to a sense of the 'apartness' of a working class Liverpool figure, a distinctive and special character who is both underdog and champion. Scouse at the Royal Court is a metaphor for class, and class is in itself used as a form of cultural capital at the Theatre.

The second form of capital at play in the Royal Court is participation and the breaking of the fourth wall. The accepted rules of contemporary British theatregoing have been adapted at the Royal Court to facilitate a specific type of enjoyment; not the distancing of the aesthete or a suspension of disbelief, nor yet the spiritual or intellectual elevation discussed by impact studies, but the involved, immersed participation of a socialising audience on a good night out. It is not that people have forgotten the ordinary rules of conduct, it is that audiences in collusion with performers have constructed new or different rules – and a third of this audience didn't know the rules anyway as it is the first time they have attended (Royal Court, 2009). This participation includes calling out or 'banter', verbal reactions to events in the staged story, show-specific activity such as waving scarves in *YNWA*, and getting up and dancing in the



inevitable end of show finale. Participation is seen by both Bourdieu (2010) and McGrath (1989) to be part of a working class aesthetic, and this sort of participation is reminiscent of the football match or bingo hall, as well as older forms of popular entertainment such as the holiday camp, the working men's club, the music hall, and indeed Shakespearean theatres such as The Globe.

These tropes play on, assert and exploit working class audience members' 'competence and familiarity' (Bourdieu, 2010, p.382), that is their cultural capital. Audience members at the Royal Court can increase their cultural capital by demonstrating their knowledge of what it is to be Scouse, as well as their disposition to relax, let go, enjoy themselves, join in, and get (or even make) the joke; their ability to have a laugh. This capital is directly related to their own *habitus*, and, as part of that *habitus*, their aesthetic taste.

This thesis also reminds us that class is still intimately linked with taste. This is not a surprise; recently, extensive surveys such as Bennett et al.'s *Culture, Class, Distinction* (2009) and Savage et al.'s *Great British Class Survey* (2013), alongside Stewart's smaller scale study on *Culture and the middle classes* (2012), have made similar findings, as discussed in Chapter 1. Perhaps more surprising is the similarity of the boundaries in the field of contemporary British theatre to Bourdieu's descriptors in 1960s' France. While in many ways Bourdieu's descriptors are culturally specific to (and redolent of) a time and a place, they are nonetheless recognisable in the field of Liverpool theatre, both now and historically. The *avant-garde* that Bourdieu discussed still exists, although what defines it has of course changed. Working class tastes are also similar to those described by Bourdieu, with the preference for straightforward plots, simplicity of form, and of course comedy and participation. For Royal Court audiences, socialising, hedonism, and being in the moment are prized over other forms of cultural value. Transformational experiences are not being sought by these audiences, but more immediate satisfactions. Even the more thoughtful audience members did not consider preparation for

their visit beyond social events such as sharing a meal either at the theatre or elsewhere. This is not to say though that working class tastes are homogenous; some research participants expressed a liking for a wide variety of genres and forms, and some for very few. However, the theatre sold at the Royal Court is popular because it plays to these ideas of working class taste, and that is paying off.

### **Areas for future study**

There are several areas that are beyond the scope of this thesis that would be illuminating to explore. The focus of the research for this thesis has been to understand what is happening at the Royal Court Theatre and how it is experienced from the perspective of its audiences. In terms of the Royal Court itself, it would be very useful to supplement this with an understanding of the perspective of those who co-create meaning with audiences, that is the Royal Court's creative and management staff; in other words, to interrogate the field of production to complement this study of theatre consumption. Specifically, it would be interesting to know from the perspective of the producers and managers how far the development of the Royal Court as a cultural space that is attractive and comfortable to working class people was consciously planned. If it has been planned, it would be interesting to know the motivation for this, for instance how far it was an intentional strategy for distinction in what is a crowded field, or a wish to offer a cultural experience to those who are currently not served by (or are effectively excluded from) other theatres. Given what appears to be intentional usage, on and off stage, of tropes that might appeal to such audiences (participation, comedy, nostalgia and so on), and their use in marketing the shows, it would be interesting to speak to directors, performers, writers and marketers to understand whether and how such tropes have been identified, or whether the use of these tropes has grown organically.

Additionally, there is further work to be done about the Royal Court's building. In late 2015, the Royal Court began the second phase of its refurbishment (the first phase was refurbishment of the auditorium to put in the modern seating). This involved upgrading the public areas of the building such as the foyers, bars and staircases, and modernising the façade (see Figure 18). Part of the intention of the upgrade is to signal to the public who don't attend the Royal Court that they are welcome there. According to Gillian Miller, Chief Executive of the Royal Court Trust (in Jones, 2014b): 'Unless you come into the theatre, you don't know we've done anything inside...I hope this will get the message out to new people that things are changing and improving at the Royal Court. Maybe they will come in during the day and look and then try a show, which would be great'.

*The Liverpool Echo* gives some sense of the changes: 'the old box office [has been] replaced by a glass-fronted multi-use welcome centre, topped by a new first floor wrap-around balcony shaped in weathered steel' (McHale, 2015). The approach to the building and the public areas are no longer shabby, but modern, clean and shiny. While some art deco features and fittings remain, they are in contrast to the revealed brick where plaster has been removed to make the finish look more contemporary.

This recent renovation of the façade and public areas of the Royal Court provides a rare opportunity to investigate how much the building itself, and particularly the shabbiness it had for the duration of this study, was responsible for its ability to attract and retain its audience. It was noticeable that some of the research participants for this study felt that the Sterling Prize-winning refurbishment of the Everyman Theatre had made them feel as if they were no longer welcome. The Royal Court (unlike the Everyman) has the advantage of having stayed open throughout its building work, which in itself may have given audience members a greater sense of ownership of the modernised space, which may prevent audience members from reading this

as a signal of exclusion. It would be interesting to see whether this changes current audiences' perceptions of the Theatre, and whether it is successful in encouraging new people to cross its threshold.



*Figure 18: The new sleek and contemporary façade of the Royal Court, Liverpool*

*Picture shows the upgraded entrance and foyer area, and the balcony that replaces the art deco canopy.*

*Source: Good News Liverpool (2016)*

In terms of theatre history, there is much written about social class and audiences in Victorian London (notably Booth, 1991; on music hall, Bailey 1987 and 1994), and this has been useful in attempting to contextualise and understand the concerns of the Royal Amphitheatre's audiences. However it is difficult to know how far this theatregoing culture was reflected in far-flung provinces such as Liverpool. Were these social rules relaxed as other rules may have been? Or were they observed more fiercely as Liverpool attempted to present itself as a sophisticated world entity? Were the people of Liverpool in any case differently culturally oriented? Bennett

(2012) notes the challenges of historical research about audiences. It would nonetheless be possible to chart some of this in Liverpool using sources such as *The Mercury* and Shimmin's social journalism (1985; and Shimmin, Walton, and Wilcox, 1991).

A glaring omission in the history of British theatre seems to be a charting of the history of Black representation on stage. Liverpool, as an important theatrical destination but also as the gateway to the Americas, hosted black performers, and also many blackface performers such as minstrels. The portrayal of 'Other' may have reflected a general, nineteenth century fascination with the 'exotic' expressed by colonial England, but it may have been of particular interest in Liverpool with its relationship to the slave trade. It is a shame that these histories have not been collected as they would provide a useful lens through which to view some of the socio-cultural issues of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also because they reflect the largely untold story of a significant population, a story which should be told.

Finally, the growing field of audience research currently produces little work outside of impact studies that seeks to understand audiences through the lens of class or inequality. After some neglect, interest in class and inequality is re-emerging as an important focus of cultural policy and related disciplines, and such research is having an impact and shaping the debate outside academia; this has been seen for example with the Warwick Commission (Neelands et al., 2015), which has been important in reframing and amplifying the debate about who (as well as what) the arts are for. In that context, it would be interesting to see more work emerge that tries to understand how theatre and theatre attendance are conceptualised by those that don't attend theatre. It would also be interesting to further develop the work in this thesis to understand more about the relationship between notions of class identity, nostalgia and feeling 'at home'.

## Chapter 8. Epilogue: a personal reflection on the history and value of the thesis

In many ways this project has been a synthesis of interests and, as Bourdieu might describe them, personal dispositions. This short chapter reflects on these and how they shaped the research and the thesis, and effected the choices that were made. It then goes on to discuss the location of the thesis within the field of audience research, and ends with some reflections on the methods used and advice to future audience researchers.

### **The research process and the methodological choices**

As discussed in the opening chapter, the immediate impetus for the project was the (almost accidental) visit to the Royal Court, Liverpool, to see *Dirty Dusting*. On this visit, I was interested in a range of phenomena, including the interesting tropes drawn from more universal cultural experiences, such as the drop-down screen showing adverts reminiscent of cinema rather than theatre. However, I was aware even at the time that I was putting this experience into a wider context, comparing theatregoing at the Royal Court with theatregoing I had not only

experienced myself (for instance the more polite theatregoing at the Liverpool Playhouse, and the more *avant garde* audiences at Unity), but also theatregoing I had witnessed. For instance, as a front of house manager at Liverpool's Everyman Theatre in the 1980s, I had dealt with new attenders who found the black-painted auditorium not so much a democratic blank canvas as intended by its egalitarian initiators, but at best a disappointment, and at worst a personal affront; some felt that a night at the theatre should be a special experience, and the surroundings should reflect this. They seemed to want something more plush, an auditorium more like the gilt and red velvet of the traditional, old-fashioned theatre, with all of the hierarchies that implies. This affront could be expressed viscerally and angrily; there was a sense for some newcomers that they felt that the Everyman was trying to put one over on them, and they had spotted it, and would not be duped.

This dissonance, between the intention of well-meaning liberal theatre makers to create a democratic blank canvas on which anything could be drawn and in which everyone was welcome and equal, and its reception by some theatregoers who felt tricked rather than welcomed to the space, and who would prefer the traditional hierarchies of the proscenium arch, recalled semiotics, and the differing meanings producers and audiences can decode from the same artefacts. It made me wonder in what ways cultural events, and especially cultural venues themselves, signalled to audiences whether they were welcome, and what artefacts made them comfortable, or 'at home'. Specifically, I became very interested in understanding what signals the Royal Court, Liverpool, was giving to its audiences, and how its audience members were reading those signals. Methodologically for this thesis, this was to lead to the use of photographs, theatre visits, and thick description as a method by which to uncover the signals.

Recalling the reactions of those Everyman theatregoers in the 1980s however also made me more conscious that I could not be the sole interpreter of the signals the Royal Court was giving; this needed some insight from audience members themselves, and this was to lead to the focus groups and interviews undertaken for the thesis, in order to understand the perspectives of audience members. The issues of recruiting participants, and the sampling frame used (the Community Choir, supplemented with the TripAdvisor reviews) were discussed in the Methods Chapter (Chapter 2), and are further reflected on later in this chapter.

Alongside thinking about these empirical experiences of theatregoing, was a growing intellectual interest in the problematising of working class cultural attendance as a whole, and in particular a disquiet about the remedies that were implemented by agents of policy, such as the Arts Council, to encourage attendance, which seemed to be centred on pricing. It did not seem logical to assume that working class people were put off cultural attendance by economic cost, when many working class people would spend money on other cultural pursuits such as tickets for football matches or fashion items. Attendance at cultural events, including theatre, was perhaps a cultural choice, or maybe a habit; not attending might represent a lack of choice, possibly a cultural exclusion, or a self-exclusion; or it may simply signify a lack of interest.

Drawing on my own experience, my cultural attendance as a working class child and adolescent went against the grain of this class-culture relationship, and was in the context of some economic poverty. My cultural experience had been fostered by my working class family who enjoyed valorised, legitimate culture. I was aware even at the time that this experience was different to many of my peers, and reflected on why that was. My father had worked as a stagehand in theatres when on shore leave from the Merchant Navy. Later, he joined amateur dramatic societies and then a worker writers' group, and this gave him tangential but nonetheless real access to the field of cultural production; when we went to the theatre, he



knew people there, not just the occasional person in the audience, but often those involved in the production. This made us part of the social experience and not outside it. Later again, both he and my mother, who had left school to go to work at fourteen and fifteen respectively, were to return to education via the workers' education movement, completing degrees as mature students, my father going on to teach others. In this environment, theatregoing was 'normal', as was attending homologous fields such as writers' festivals and conferences, and later I attended a youth theatre. For me, this was further reinforced by my grammar school education, which celebrated – valorised – my relationship with theatre.

I was aware though that this had not been so for my primary school peers, very few of whom attended the theatre. I was also aware, as were my parents, that theatregoing and other pursuits of 'legitimate' culture had not been 'normal' for them when they were growing up in working class families and working class areas in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. My access to theatre and my comfort in theatre spaces and homologous fields had come from my parents, who had gained theirs through my father's contingent relationship with the field of cultural production. Reading Bourdieu then, with his articulation of the transmission of cultural capital via the family and then ratified by education, really resonated, and I felt his work might illuminate some of the issues around class and taking part (or not taking part) in culture.

### **Location within the field**

My growing interest in the semiotics of performance space, in a classed relationship with culture, and in Bourdieu's cultural triad, suggested a number of methodological directions. As discussed in the Methods Chapter (Chapter 2), these would include observation of theatrical events, thick descriptions, and interviews and focus groups in order to understand audiences' perspectives; this was later supplemented with an analysis of TripAdvisor so that the audience perspective was not limited to a 'special' group of Choir members. Bourdieu's work was also

helpful methodologically, as his views on a working class aesthetic and his explication of field expanded on the sorts of information I wanted to get from my research participants, to include their formative relationships with theatregoing, and an understanding of the field of Liverpool theatregoing from their perspective. These methods, and their underpinning by Bourdieu's theories on a working class aesthetic and his 'conceptual triad', place the work of this thesis very much in a sociological tradition.

Culture, in the sense of a way of life, has of course long been the subject of sociology; however cultural production and consumption have until comparatively recently been less of a focus. Through his empirical sociology, Bourdieu illuminates the relationship between class and the consumption of culture. Bourdieu's work, and the growing centrality of culture to everyday life, has meant that culture has become fundamental to sociological inquiry. Firstly, according to Bourdieu, the consumption of culture reveals, shapes and reinforces social structure. Secondly, culture is a useful tool in demonstrating class divides and class distinctions, and in revealing the symbolic violence of class. This thesis examines theatregoing as an empirical domain which simultaneously shapes, reinforces, and reveals social structure.

### **Reflection on the methods used, and advice to audience researchers**

On the whole, the research methods employed for this thesis worked well in gathering substantial data in order to give a comprehensive sense of the whole trajectory of a theatregoing event at the Royal Court, Liverpool, including the 'extrinsic' experience of theatre (Brown and Novak, 2007, p.17). As seen in Chapter 3, such holistic analyses are commended by several theorists (Sauter, 2002; Bennett, 1998; Schechner, 2004), but are rarely undertaken. An understanding of the whole event felt necessary in really examining what it is about the Royal Court that makes people feel at home, which is so much broader than any single element, and I would recommend a holistic approach to other researchers of theatre audiences.

Using a range of approaches meant that different sorts of data could be collected, and disadvantages of one method could be offset by another. Particularly useful was the data captured online by TripAdvisor. There is a wealth of such online data that is very easy to access, and more could be done with it to analyse audiences' responses to and engagement with theatre. (It would, for instance, be very interesting to examine and compare not only the content but the nature of the discourse about different theatres in a particular field.)

As discussed in Chapter 2, I faced some difficulties in engaging audience members as research participants. I tried both informal and informal approaches, but neither were effective. Using a pre-existing group (in this case the Choir) really helped as I was able to explain to the whole group what my research was about, and leave them to decide whether or not to volunteer to take part, removing individual pressure, and allowing people to volunteer alongside people they were comfortable with. I was also able to build up trust and rapport with the group members through attending Choir rehearsals, and this meant that people felt confident to volunteer. However, using an existing group did cause some issues. I was aware of the first one, and was able to correct it. The second though I did not become aware of until much later.

The first issue caused by using a pre-existing group as a sampling frame was the potential for group members to have a very specific relationship with the Royal Court, Liverpool, its staff and its creative team, due to their group membership and the relationship of the group to the Royal Court. This is discussed in the Methods Chapter (Chapter 2), and was countered by the use of TripAdvisor reviews as a way of understanding non-Choir members' perceptions of the Theatre.

The second issue was that neither my focus groups nor my interviews included any men. This was not intentional, and in fact I only realised this omission when I was analysing the data. The gender of participants reflected the constituency of the Royal Court Choir, which was predominantly female, and participants had been self-selecting, which may have reinforced the

gender bias as friends volunteered together or joined other friends. Methodologically, this was not an issue, as the participants were not intended to be a representative sample either of the Royal Court audience or of theatre audiences as a whole. However, it would have been very interesting to hear and understand the experiences and perspectives of some male audience members. Particularly, it was noted in Chapter 5 that research participants did not seem to have experienced social opprobrium about their enjoyment of theatregoing. Several possible reasons are given for this. However, in retrospect, I wonder whether such opprobrium may have been more likely to have been experienced by male audience members. Bourdieu suggests a very particular relationship between women and culture. According to Bourdieu (2010; 2011), in a patriarchal society, women are tasked with the bestowal and fostering of cultural capital (in contrast to men, who dominate the political and economic spheres rather than concern themselves with the transmission of taste). Women's special place as cultural nurturers may explain the lack of opprobrium reported by these female focus group members. This is a useful reminder that responses to culture in our society are not only classed, but also gendered.

The final piece of practical advice has to be about cake. Given the difficulties of the sharing, cutting and distributing of cake in the second focus group, my last piece of advice to future researchers would of course be: don't take your cake to the focus group – but if you must, take cupcakes.

Alongside the practical advice, I would also urge researchers to examine working class audiences for theatre, and indeed the working class experience of other aspects of culture. Bourdieu discusses a working class aesthetic, but it lacks the nuance of his explication of a middle class aesthetic; beyond that, there is a lack of research about the ways in which working class people are experiencing culture. Working class people need to be heard and their ways of experiencing culture, their values and their norms, need to be understood, especially as so much public

money is spent in the name of widening access for them to attend cultural events, and so little on understanding what they want from them. Working class audiences, and working class people, need to be seen as more than a problem of absence.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Thick Description

### Extract from the thick description of Variety Lunch 2, 29/1/14 – Mickey Finn's act

The following is an extract from a thick description, written up from notes taken at a *Variety Lunch* event. It is the final part of the thick description; Liverpool comedian Mickey Finn was the second act on the day, following singer and actor Joe Slater, from television's *Waterloo Road*.

Through his act, Finn tells us he is a Catholic ex-docker, 'born and bred' in St Sylvester's parish, Scotland Road. For many, Scotland Road is the heart of Liverpool, a once thriving arterial route boasting big shops and a pub on every corner, so famously busy that it lent its name worldwide to ships' passageway used by stewards. Moreover, the docker is the real job, combining masculinity with the wily sense of survival that was needed in an unregulated and insecure industry. The docker is not only from a time of fighting to survive, but also part of the 'real' of the industrial, commercial and trade, as opposed to the post-industrial call centre service industry. Similarly, being a working class Catholic is part of the mythology of this city of Liverpool, built in part on Irish immigration, a city romantically full of descendants of people fleeing the Irish Famine who never had enough money for the second stage of the journey to New York. The working class, Scouse, Catholic is reflected in popular culture, from Carla Lane's *Liver Birds* and *Bread* to Jimmy McGovern's episodes of *Brookside*. Mickey Finn has all of these credentials and



he wants to share them, to claim his authenticity and his right to be there; he embodies the Liverpool of a mythic time and place. This is performance as performativity, not just performativity of the man, but performativity of the city itself.

And so it goes on. There are more confessions; more criminality ('pinching timber'), more encounters with the police. More local vernacular like 'the sun's cracking the flags', 'after the Christmas', and 'the tontine', the anachronistic name given to a savings or Christmas Club still popular in Liverpool today; more local references, to Stanley Park, to Ford Cemetery, to the further afield 'Lither Land' [Litherland], made strange through mispronunciation; more references to Catholic ritual like the funeral; more specifics, such as 1950's priest Father Barrow of Saint Sylvester's; more Catholicisms and exclusion: 'the presbytery. That's the priest's house, for the Protestants'.

Nonetheless, the act is a tour de force, with updated material layered over old familiar jokes woven through with nostalgia. There is some well observed physical comedy and the occasional impromptu response to audience input. In one joke, he intentionally mispronounces Kirkby, emphasising the usually silent second 'k', and is corrected by an audience member who's missed the joke. 'Oh sorry. I didn't know the Lady Mayoress was in', he responds. He does a really good mime of a drunk, putting the key in the front door, tongue out and one eye closed as if he's threading a needle. He plays on knowing how the audience will respond; he tells of going into St John's Precinct for 'two gills of snails', to a 'Yeeuuch!' from the audience; the response is enjoyed onstage as well as in the seats. It's nostalgic too; the people here will remember the thriving fish market that used to be in the 'old' St John's market and the early days of the new precinct. I wonder

whether there is a fish stall in St John's now. There is a big laugh of recognition when he mentions rough pub next door *The Penny Farthing*. 'It's going to get done up. It's becoming *The Mountain Bike*...[Have you] tried walking on that carpet?' He does a great mime of a sticky tread. He mentions the first act, crooner Joe Slater of *Waterloo Road*. 'Who does he play [in *Waterloo Road*]?' shouts an audience member. 'I don't know. I'm a comedian not a director', he shoots straight back; he shakes his head. 'This is the first time I've been on a quiz'. The audience love the ad lib, and he has built up the laughter so people are really gasping for breath. And to finish off, he does a joke about a transsexual. There is huge applause. They've loved it and are still laughing and repeating bits of jokes as they get up to go. He's gone down a storm.

Undoubtedly the whole act is racist, sexist, heteronormative; it treats people from outside Liverpool as foreigners, and treats foreigners worse. It plays on what 'we' all know about the 'Other'. The 'Other' here includes women, Protestants, anyone from outside very tight boundaries of Liverpool, transsexuals, 'posh' people; this list is not exhaustive. And for those of 'us' on the 'inside', its exclusivity is of course also its inclusivity. There's a warmth, an ordinariness, a sense of community, a recognition, a 'we all know these people and these places and these things; we're not phased by them'; these 'Other' things are odd, and our defence is to laugh at them. And we're all the same here. Aren't we? And as long as we are it's inclusive. And this audience, an audience made up, as far as I can see, exclusively of white people from Liverpool who have at least been assumed to be straight and largely working class, has loved it. 'We' have all laughed together. There have been no dissenting voices.

I am slightly depressed by this. The material has made me think of Trevor Griffiths' play *The Comedians*. Mickey Finn's whole act is 'a joke that feeds on ignorance [and] starves its audience' (1976, p.23). Have we really come no further?

I go back to my seat to pick up my coat. Southport man is not happy either, but for different reasons. 'I'm late for the Empire now,' he says.

On the way back to the car I check whether there is still a fish stall in St John's. There is, just one left in a corner of what is otherwise an abandoned and empty fish market. I think of buying two gills of snails.

## Appendix 2: TripAdvisor



soulboyBognor  
Bognor

Contributor

★ 17 reviews

10 attraction reviews

17 helpful votes

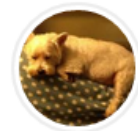
### *"Lennon, brilliant play, a must see"*

Reviewed 25 August 2013

We booked on line to see Lennon at the Royal Court, nice enough old theatre, staff were friendly enough, got a drink before the show. We paid £13 for a ticket and it was money well spent, the show was fantastic, I am a big fan so for me it was a great tribute to a great man and to...

[More](#)

Was this review helpful? [Yes](#)



White K  
Manchester, United Kingdom

Senior Reviewer

★ 10 reviews

8 attraction reviews

3 helpful votes

### *"Always a winner"*

Reviewed 16 August 2013

You can't go wrong when you go to watch a play at the Royal Court. Over the last 3 years we have seen most of the plays and found them brilliant entertainment. The large group of actors are often also good musicians and singers with great comic timing. Often the plays do have a local theme which is great and...

[More](#)

Was this review helpful? [Yes](#) 1



BJonesBaza  
Wales

Senior Contributor

★ 23 reviews

9 attraction reviews

23 helpful votes

### *"BOUNCERS!"*

Reviewed 12 August 2013

This theatre is full of atmospheric character with its old world charm. We laughed heartily from start to finish of this production! Each actor portrayed their characters so well, that we were immersed into the scenes from the opening words. Between the laughs, there is a serious message interwoven into the script by 'Lucky Eric'. Would definitely recommend this performance!...

[More](#)

Was this review helpful? [Yes](#) 1

*Screenshot of some of the TripAdvisor reviews of Royal Court events in the 2013-14 season*

## **Selected TripAdvisor reviews**

### **“Great theatre and location”**

peter W, Liverpool, 17 August 2014

We went to see Bouncers and really enjoyed the show it was so funny and the jokes were so Liverpool orientated which made it even funnier.

We chose to sit in the front row of the circle as we were not eating before the show but we have dined downstairs in the past and thoroughly enjoyed the food on offer.

So you can have the best of both worlds by either dining beforehand or just going to enjoy the show.

### **“Bouncers A\*\*\*\*\*”**

F8156, Liverpool, 13 August 2014

My wife and I went with the in laws to watch bouncers.

What a fantastic show. With Minimal sets and no costume changes these four amazing talented actors worked hard which made for an amazing show.

None stop laughs from start to finish.

This had to be one of the best shows that we have seen in a long time, beating shows with much large budget by far.

Must be seen!!!!

## **No Title**

Scousegrannie [no location given], 15 March 2014.

The best musical production for a long time. Went with an open mind and no unrealistic expectations. The place rocked!! Brilliant cast, fantastic story of course and an exceptional audience!! A must for all those LFC supporters. Theatre could do with a refurbishment and lick of paint. Toilets and bar facilities poor. But did not detract from this amazingly good production.

## **“Great theatre, fantastic Lennon musical, great night!”**

Marbet41 [no location given, although was a visitor to Liverpool]; 20 July 2014

Went to see Lennon the Musical at Royal Court last week and it was great. What a lovely old theatre, sat in circle at front and was perfect viewing. Sound was good. People were eating downstairs before show and it looked like it was worth the money. However the show was so amazing we went back again the next night. The box office staff deserve a special mention as the girl that served us was lovely. Will definitely go back if visiting liverpool in the future. Also only 5 mins walk from cavern quarter, excellent! My son and I still can't believe how great the 'young Paul' was, he should be a star as should the 'young john' fab!!!

## **“MARVELLOUS MATINEE”**

KEVIN C, Stockport, 13 May 2014

I had not visited The Royal Court since seeing The Bunnymen nearly thirty years ago and what a pleasant surprise!

We went to see the excellent "Special Measures" (required viewing if you teach in a State School and you are suspicious of all Ofsted Inspectors ,box tickers and Gove acolytes) for the Wednesday afternoon matinee.

What a great venue!

Impressed with the cabaret style layout , with easy access to the cheap bar and the toilets.Had a great view of the stage with our own private table space-with drink at hand.Now this is the way to enjoy a play!

Add to that the helpful staff and you have the perfect way to entertain yourselves in the "Pool of Life" on a midweek afternoon.

**"great venue"**

450dk1, Liverpool, 28 July 2014

just been to see "Bouncers" and as usual had a great night out,

(if you book early you can get a good discount, also available some afternoons for matinee performances)

staff are always helpful and the plays are very good quality,

its recently been refurbished to a high standard and the actors usually come out and mingle with the audience after the shows, they are happy to give autographs and photos to fans

the bar could have a better selection and choice of beers is the only feedback i can give.

## Themes emerging from the TripAdvisor Reviews

1	Show and content	Good show
2		Poor show
3		Set/costume
4		Actors/cast/performances
5		Music
6		Scouseness/localness
7		Humour/comedy
8		Moving/emotional
9		Entertaining
10		Political
11		+ political
12		-ve political
13		Ability to relate to content
14		Shows consistently good
15		Shows consistently bad
16		Show/content in general
17	Venue	Décor, nice theatre
18		+ clean
19		Seats and seating
20		Toilets
21		Good facilities
22		+ Improvement to facilities
23		Food as a feature
24		Matinees/timing of shows
25		Staff pleasant helpful
26		Easy to book
27		Environs/convenience
28		Drinking throughout
29		Bar good
30		Bar too busy
31		Bar better selection
32		Refurb needed
33		-ve upstairs seats
34		hard seats
35		poor customer service
36		poor food
37		Venue in general
38	Atmosphere/audience	Atmosphere
39		Audience good
40		Atmosphere/audience in general
41	Other/General	Nostalgia
42		Good night out
43		Value for money
44		Too expensive
45		Will come back





## Appendix 3: Information sheet and consent form given to participants

### Information Sheet



YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET

#### **Title of study:**

Theatre audiences in Liverpool: the case of the Royal Court Theatre

My name is Maria Barrett. I am a postgraduate student at the University of Warwick in the Centre for Cultural Policy. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which concerns audiences and theatregoing in Liverpool. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **Aims of the research**

The information sheet should give a brief summary of the research project and its aims, clearly outlining the entire research process in a language accessible for a non-expert audience.

The project is a study of theatregoing, looking at the whole theatregoing experience to try to understand how being in an audience can make people feel, and what the signs are that can make people feel comfortable or uncomfortable. I will be observing and describing a number of theatregoing experiences at the Royal Court Liverpool, looking at the website and programming of shows, and interviewing a selection of audience members as well as some staff and cast at the Royal Court.

**Funding:** The project is not being funded.

#### **Who you are recruiting (including exclusion criteria)**

Potential participants will be solicited by the researcher in several ways: approaches in person to people who attend theatre performances at the Royal Court Liverpool based on postcodes/box office data; discussion with existing groups at the theatre; and an open call online via the theatre's Facebook group.

#### **What will happen if the participant agrees to take part (when, where, how long etc)**

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct an interview with you either alone or with others at a time and location of your choice, for instance a café, pub or a room in the Royal Court. The interview should last no more than an hour. With your permission, I will audiotape and/or take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

The interview will involve questions about your experience and feelings about theatregoing at of attending the Royal Court, such as what you felt about being at the theatre, about what you do before and after attending, and about your feelings about theatregoing in general.

I may wish to conduct follow-up interviews with you for added clarification or more information. If so, I will contact you by email or phone to request this. Of course you can choose not to participate further.

#### **Any risks (possibility for distress, potential adverse reactions, inconvenience or discomfort)**

There are no particular risks that could reasonably be expected to result from the study.

#### **Possible benefits**

There are no particular benefits of taking part in this project although you might get a cup of tea or a beer. All participants are welcome to have a copy of the final report.

#### **Arrangements for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality**

In compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998, it is important for you to know what information will be held about you, for how long, and for what purpose. All information taken during the course of this research will be anonymised so no participant will be identifiable from the final report or any presentations of the research. First names only will be used in the report. You can choose for a pseudonym (false name) to be used in the report if you prefer. Real names and contact details will be held electronically by the researcher for the duration of the project but will be deleted a year after the project end; no other person will have access to these or be able to link back the names in the report to an individual participant. No external agency is being used to transcribe data.

#### **Anticipated plans for dissemination/publication.**

The final report will be submitted for consideration of a PhD. Extracts from the report may be used as the basis for journal articles, books or book chapters, and presentations at academic conferences.

#### **Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time**

It is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **Do you have any questions or need further information?**

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact the researcher using the following contact details:

Maria Barrett  
LIPA  
Mount Street  
Liverpool  
L1 9HF  
07411 626384  
m.barrett@lipa.ac.uk

If you feel this study has harmed you in any way, you can contact Warwick University using the details below for further advice and information:

David Wright  
Room A.024 Milburn House  
Extension 51112 or +44(0) 24761 51112  
E-mail d.wright.3@warwick.ac.uk

**Thank you very much for reading this.** I hope you will be able to participate and that if you do you enjoy it!

## Consent form



### CONSENT

Study: Theatre audiences in Liverpool: the case of the Royal Court Theatre

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

If you wish to participate in this study, please tick the boxes as appropriate and sign and date below.

☐ I have received an information sheet about this study and agree to participate

☐ I am happy for my first name to be used in this study, OR

☐ I would prefer a pseudonym (false name) to be used

☐ I agree to my interview being audiotaped OR

☐ I would prefer not to be audiotaped and notes to be taken instead.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (*please print*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's email address/contact number (*please print*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix 4: Questions for ethnographic research

	Theatre-going journey	Question	Rationale/link with theory
1	General	What do you think of the Royal Court	Icebreaker; undirected response
2		Tell me about the Choir	Icebreaker; undirected response
3	General	Do you feel 'at home' in this theatre? In other theatres? Why do you think that is?	What reinforces the sense of <i>habitus</i> ? What are the manifestations produced by the field of theatregoing? 'Feel for the game'
4	General	What do you think of the shows?	Open question to elicit thoughts on form, content
5	General/venue	What do you think of the seating arrangements?	Contrast to 'icy solemnity' (B, p.26)
6	General/venue	What do you think of the building?	What are the signs that make you comfortable or otherwise?
7	Other theatres	Do you go to other theatres?	Capital, field
8	Other theatres	Which do you go to?	Field
9	Other theatres	Why don't you go to other theatres?	Field, <i>habitus</i> , signs
10	Other theatres	IF they don't go elsewhere because they may not 'fit in': what makes you think that? Is it the building outside, the inside, how to behave, what's on, who goes, what they wear, 'getting' it?	What are the signs that may make them aware of a lack of appropriate <i>habitus</i> ? [Danger here that there is an assumption of a lack of <i>habitus</i> being the problem as opposed to a lack of interest]
11	Other theatres	How do you feel about those theatres?	Field, <i>habitus</i> , signs
12	Other theatres	What do you think of the plays other theatres put on?	Dislike of formal experimentation, strategy for distinction (Bourdieu p.33)
13	Before/After	Describe your whole night out – what do you do before/after? Who do you come with?	Ritual, field, social capital
14	Before	Do you talk about going before the event? Who with? What about?	Social capital
15	Before	How do you dress? Is it different from 'usual'?	Liminality, <i>nomos</i>
16	Before	What makes you go to the RC? Is it the shows, or the audience, or the theatre, or the 'event/occasion' (dinner etc.) or your friends going or the people who work there, opportunity to participate?	Open question to solicit undirected responses which may (or may not) relate to form, content, <i>nomos</i> , field, <i>habitus</i> , capital, social capital etc.
17	Before	How do you decide what to see?	

18	Before	What do you think of the actors?	Repertory, familiarity, familiarity with field
19	Before	What do you think of the website (maybe screenshots here?)	
20	During	What do you do when you get there?	Open question to elicit ritual, <i>nomos</i> , social capital
21	During	How do you interact (people in groups, talking to other groups, maybe show pic?)	Liminality
22	During/ audience	What do you talk about when you're there?	Liminality, comfort, <i>habitus</i> , social capital
23	During/ audience	How do you feel you 'fit in' with the audience?	<i>Habitus</i> , <i>nomos</i> , field
24	During/ audience	How do you feel as part of the audience?	Liminality, <i>communitas</i> , <i>habitus</i> , comfort in field
25	During/ audience	What do you think of the others in the audience? Are they like you? Do they all 'fit in'? Does this matter?	<i>Habitus</i> , comfort in field
26	During	How do other people dress/behave?	Consciousness of own and others' <i>habitus</i> , <i>nomos</i>
27	During	What is it about the type of theatre the RC put on? (dancing, singing, participation, fourth wall, repertory company etc)	Form, content, <i>nomos</i>
29	During	What do you think of having the bar there?	
30	After	Do you talk about going after the event?	Social capital
31	Past	Can you remember the first time you came? Did you worry about anything? (Dress, how to behave)	Rituals, dress code that may indicate this is not their field; 'other' people
32	Past	Did your parents/do your family go to the theatre?	Inherited cultural capital, social use value, ability to inherit <i>nomos</i> , discourse etc.
33	Past	Can you remember your first trip to the theatre?	Open question to solicit undirected responses which may (or may not) relate to form, content, <i>nomos</i> , field, <i>habitus</i> , capital, social capital etc.
34	Other	What do your other friends think of you going to the theatre/RC?	Value of theatre as social capital within peer groups
37	Other	Cost – time and money – question?	

## **Prompt sheet used in focus groups and interviews**

### **General**

1. What do you think of the Royal Court
2. Tell me about the Choir
3. Do you feel 'at home' in this theatre? In other theatres? Why do you think that is?
4. What do you think of the shows?
5. What do you think of the seating arrangements?
6. What do you think of the building?

### **Other theatres**

7. Do you go to other theatres?
8. Which do you go to?
9. Why don't you go to other theatres?
10. IF they don't go elsewhere because they may not 'fit in': what makes you think that?  
PROMPTS: the building outside, the inside, how to behave, what's on, who goes, what they wear, 'getting' it?
11. How do you feel about those theatres?
12. What do you think of the plays other theatres put on?

### **The night out: before and after**

13. Describe your whole night out – what do you do before/after? Who do you come with?
14. Do you talk about going before the event? Who with? What about?
15. How do you dress? Is it different from 'usual'?
16. What makes you go to the RC?  
PROMPTS: shows, audience, theatre, 'event/occasion' (dinner etc.), friends going, people who work there, opportunity to participate?
17. How do you decide what to see?
18. What do you think of the actors?
19. What do you think of the website (maybe screenshots here?)

### **During**

20. What do you do when you get there?
21. How do you interact (people in groups, talking to other groups, maybe show pic?)
22. What do you talk about when you're there?
23. How do you feel you 'fit in' with the audience?
24. How do you feel as part of the audience?
25. What do you think of the others in the audience? Are they like you? Do they all 'fit in'?  
Does this matter?
26. How do other people dress/behave?
27. What is it about the type of theatre the RC put on? (dancing, singing, participation, fourth wall, repertory company etc.)
28. What do you think of having the bar there?
29. Do you talk about going after the event?

## **Past**

- 30. Can you remember the first time you came? Did you worry about anything? (Dress, how to behave)
- 31. Did your parents/do your family go to the theatre?
- 32. Can you remember your first trip to the theatre?

## **Other questions**

- 33. What do your other friends think of you going to the theatre/RC?
- 34. Do you know people who work in the theatre?
- 35. Are you part of the Facebook group?
- 36. Cost – time and money – question?
- 37. Questions about educational level, postcode and class?



## Appendix 5: Research participants

**Angela** (Interviewee) – is sixty and from Kirkby, where there was (and is) no theatre. She left school at fifteen and became a hairdresser. She attends the Royal Court, the Empire and the Everyman, having been introduced to theatre through participation later in life.

**Angie** (Focus Group 2) – Angie is in her twenties. She loves musicals and is a particular fan of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Her mother is Karen who contributed to the first focus group.

**Edna** (Focus Group 2) – In her early eighties, Edna was the oldest research participant. She grew up in north Liverpool as one of ten children in the poverty of the 1930s. She has attended theatre throughout her life having been introduced to it by her invalid sister.

**Glennis** (Focus Group 2) – Glennis is in her early sixties. Like Lynne, she attended a secondary modern school (part of the tripartite system operated from 1944 to the 1980s, and in contrast to Grammar and Technical schools).

**Jackie** (Focus Group 2) – Jackie is in her sixties. She grew up in a block of flats in north Liverpool. She attended theatre as a child but less so as an adult. She has been reintroduced to theatregoing through the Royal Court Choir.

**Joyce** (Interviewee) – Joyce is in her mid-forties. She is Education Manager at Merseyside Maritime Museum and lives in Stoneycroft in north Liverpool. She doesn't go the theatre as often as she'd like due to the expense, although she always took her children to pantomime.

**Karen** (Focus Group 1) – Karen is middle-aged. She looks after her dad, often staying overnight at his home, which makes socialising difficult. She also has a health condition. She prefers musicals to plays. Karen's daughter is Angie who was part of Focus Group 2.

**Lynne** (Focus Group 2) – Lynne is 63. She was introduced to the theatre as a child by her teacher. Lynne trained as a nurse and then a special needs teacher, and is now working with people with learning difficulties, where she has introduced a theatre group.

**Pat** (Focus Group 2) – Pat is in her sixties. While she attended theatre occasionally as a child, she did not go to the theatre as an adult and has only recently started going again as a part of the Choir.

**Sarah** (Focus Group 1) – Sarah is university educated, middle-aged, and a teacher from the Wirral. She's an avid theatre attender who jokingly describes herself as having a 'theatre problem'.

**Simon Bell** (interviewee) – worked at the Royal Court while he was a student in Liverpool in the 1980s. He went on to work in the live music sector. Simon is currently Post Graduate Programme Leader at the UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Beckett University, and is on the V Festival management team.

**Susan** (Focus Group 1) – As well as being one of the youngest members of the Community Choir, Susan is also part of the Royal Court Youth Theatre. She is a student at Liverpool Media Academy, and attends theatre often, particularly the Royal Court.

**Ursula** (Focus Group 1) – Ursula is middle-aged and a teacher; her children have grown up and left home. She now goes to a West End show once a year as 'a treat' and attends local theatres (the Playhouse and Everyman, but not the Unity).

## **Appendix 6: Themes used in analysing ethnographic data**

NVivo was used to aid with data transcription and storage. Data was initially coded using themes ('nodes') created in the programme. These initial themes drew on Bourdieu's work as well as the qualitative research discussed in Chapter 1. Other themes were developed following writing up, further reading and engagement with and with the theoretical framework, and with this and other data.

### **Themes:**

- Cost
- Introduction to theatre
- Memory, nostalgia
- Participation
- Rituals: preparation; dress; extending the social event
- The building: the external environment, décor
- Social space: food and drink, other audience members, atmosphere liminality, *nomos*, theatre staff
- Aesthetics, especially content: Humour, comedy, Scouseness, exceptionalism
- Field: other theatres, categorisation of other repertoires, audiences, buildings
- Discourse, value of theatre as social capital within family and peer groups.

### **Emergent/added themes and issues:**

- Ad hoc family performances
- Participative introduction to theatre (youth theatre, open days)
- Nostalgia for the Royal Court, Royal Court as a simulacrum
- Subverting the field through dress
- Participants' own markers of distinction from others.

## PhD Thesis: June 2016

